

DIABLO

STORM OF LIGHT



NATE KENYON

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STORM OF LIGHT

NATE KENYON

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*This one's for Ellie Rose, for sleeping soundly during
Daddy's early morning writing sessions.*

PROLOGUE



The High Heavens

Since the dawn of time, the forces of darkness and light have remained locked in eternal conflict.

Our battles have raged throughout the centuries like flames erupting from smoldering embers. Whenever the angels have struck down the darkness, it has risen again, stronger than before. And yet each time, the keepers of the light and the rulers of the High Heavens have claimed ultimate victory.

At the End of Days, our foolish pride made us blind. In the guise of a child, Diablo rose up from the ashes, climbing through Sanctuary to shatter the Diamond Gates. And truly, success was close at hand, for the Crystal Arch, the source of angelic power, was within the grasp of the Prime Evil.

Until mankind intervened.

One mortal soul stood against the destruction of two worlds. The nephalem's great courage gave strength to us all, turned the tide of fate, and led to the fall of Diablo and the salvation of Sanctuary and the High Heavens themselves.

But darkness does not fade so easily. Once more, our victory has been claimed far too soon.

The Prime Evil has been struck down.

But there are other forces that would move against the world of men.



A falcon in flight might have viewed it as a series of silver-tipped mountain peaks rising up through the mist, the scope of them too breathtaking for any mere human to grasp. At its center rose a structure taller than the rest, a shining tower topped with a multifaceted arch that shimmered like cut diamonds. The light of the Heavens kissed these gleaming skins, set fire to them so that the entire vast tableau glowed like outstretched wings, spires reaching ever skyward as glittering crystal threw sparks to warm the darkness.

The Silver City.

In the world of angels, the archangel of Wisdom had recently come to realize, there are no beds.

Bleary-eyed and worn, Tyrael looked up from where his quill lay across the parchment as warmth and light washed through soaring arch and buttress, breathing life into the immense open space around

him. He'd had no use for sleep until his mortal soul had taken up residence within his breast. Now the constant light that infused the Heavens confused his newfound internal rhythms, and he longed to lay his head on a gentler surface than the stone floor of these chambers. But he had yet to summon something more comfortable. The shedding of his wings had already given his brethren enough cause to look for any sign of weakness. He would not hand them another.

Tyrael flexed his cramped fingers. He had been taking his own notes on Deckard's heavy scrawl, but there would be no more work done tonight, in spite of his unspoken promise to Deckard and Leah to finish what they had begun. And yet he could not bring himself to close his eyes. *Not yet.* There was much to consider beyond his own mortal failings. His growing rift with Imperius and the Council, for one. The role of men in controlling their destinies. The fate of Sanctuary itself.

And above all else, what to do about the thing that resided among them, seemingly silent and still as its tendrils crept like blackened pitch across sacred ground.

The archangel left his solitary chambers and walked through the lonely rooms and corridors that lined the Courts of Justice and the Ring of Judgment, his footsteps echoing on endless planes of polished stone. His mortal senses had difficulty accepting his surroundings. He had resided here for countless millennia, and yet he saw it differently now. Each space opened to one larger and more stunning than the one before; pointed arches and intricate, ribbed vaults soared far overhead; clustered columns ran through infinity; light burst forth at random from countless crystal facets that shifted and changed colors at will.

When the angels were present, their song resonated along with the Arch in a perfect harmony of light and sound. But Justice was empty now, its vast courts, benches, and seating vacant and cold, and the music of the Heavens was soft and subdued.

The archangel felt an odd ache in his breast, a longing for things left behind. Although angels still brought their grievances here, Tyrael's former home had remained largely unoccupied since his transformation. The Luminarei, Defenders of the Arch, had taken up residence with Imperius in the Halls of Valor.

I should remove myself from this place, he thought. *It is an echo of my former self, one that shall never return.* And yet he could not. Since Malthael's disappearance, Wisdom's domain had also fallen silent, and the Angiris Council suffered for it. Tyrael had meant to assume those duties and act as a guiding hand during the most challenging decisions the Council would face. But the pools that spilled through that realm

seemed alien to him, unsettling, and Chalad'ar called with a song he dared not answer. The legendary chalice required abilities that he was no longer sure he possessed.

He felt an ache in his back, a twinge in his knee. His physical form was already breaking down, the slow decline toward the grave that all mortals must face. He knew in his heart that the choice he made was the right one. *And yet you still doubt yourself.*

What did it mean for an archangel to be so fragile? How could he fight back the darkness if his new body was so vulnerable to attack? Would he have been better prepared to face the challenges that were coming if he had not made that choice?

The Courts of Justice had given way to an atrium that curved far above his head. Through another arch, a platform made of crystal and stone and carved with intricate, flowing designs stretched before him. The Angiris Council chamber. Tyrael was faced with the thrones from which the archangels made their arguments. The chamber was empty, and the light that had streamed through the arching windows earlier was curiously absent here.

The Black Soulstone sat on its pedestal as if awaiting his arrival.

The stone's sharp facets and points thrust up from the base like a blackened claw. It was barely larger than a man's skull. How could a thing like this hold such terrible darkness?

Tyrael approached slowly, both fascinated and repelled by the stone's power. An unfamiliar chill ran through him, a mortal shell's warning. The bloody light that shone from the Black Soulstone had been extinguished after Diablo fell and the stone was retrieved from a lower realm of the Heavens. But as Tyrael moved closer, he thought he saw the faintest glint from within.

"Halt!"

The archangel had reached out a hand toward the stone. He quickly withdrew it and turned toward the voice.

Balzael stood beneath the arch that led to the chamber, his impressive form partially hidden in shadow. The right hand of Imperius. The Luminarei warrior stepped out onto the platform and unfurled his magnificent wings, tendrils of light snapping up toward the chamber roof. Balzael's armor was golden, the breastplate marked with the symbols of his rank.

"What is Wisdom doing here alone?"

Had Tyrael sensed the slightest mocking tone in the use of his new title? "Do not question me, Balzael. I go where I please. Has Imperius sent you to spy on me?"

"I guard the stone," Balzael said. "That is the task given to me, above all else."

"Those are not the only orders the archangel of Valor has for you,

are they? He does not trust his brother?"

"Mortal souls are easily corrupted."

Tyrael's heart beat faster at the warrior's impudence. The implication was clear: Balzael had wings; Tyrael did not and was the lesser for it. "And angels' pride blinds them to their fate," the archangel said. "I commanded you not long ago. Do you forget this so soon?"

Instead of backing down, Balzael moved closer. "You taught me well enough to know when to be suspicious."

Balzael made the slightest move toward his sword, barely enough to be noticeable. But the statement it made was clear. Anger washed over Tyrael at the brazen challenge, and he stepped forward, too, standing tall, his fingers itching to grasp El'druin where it hung at his side. At the same time, he was aware of his limits. Although skilled in battle, Tyrael was not as strong as he had been as an immortal.

For a moment, Tyrael believed Balzael might draw the weapon. Then a glow of light manifested at the entrance to the chamber. The archangel of Hope appeared before them, sweeping forward and seeming to assess the situation in an instant. "Leave here," she said to Balzael. "We will be meeting soon."

"I have not received notice of such a—"

"The Angiris Council is not required to notify you of anything," Auriel said. The light surrounding her changed slightly, pulsing like a heartbeat. She was not often so brief; the impact was all the greater for it. "I will watch over the stone. Now, go."

Balzael hesitated a moment and gave a slight bow. "As you wish," he said, then turned and disappeared through the arch, his light fading away to darkness.

Auriel and Tyrael were left alone. After a few more pulsing beats, she turned to him. "He has grown arrogant after his promotion."

"Bravery and arrogance are close cousins," Tyrael replied. "He showed great heroism against the Prime Evil and sent more demons back to the Hells than any other. Imperius made the obvious choice. I would have done the same."

"Perhaps." Auriel's light grew softer and warmer as she studied him. "I would assume you are here to meet, except there is no Council meeting. You look . . . weary, my brother. You cannot sleep?"

"Would that I had no need of such a thing."

"Ah, but you do," Auriel said. "I sensed your inner conflict. It drew me from the gardens. Balzael, he . . ." She made a motion, as if to dismiss the thought. "The Heavens are not the most forgiving place or the most sensitive. The angels might not agree with what you have done, Tyrael, but that does not make the choice any less valid."

Auriel removed Al'maiesh, the Cord of Hope, and reached, the

embodiment of light itself, her armor and flowing robes ending with fingered gauntlets. As she draped the cord over his shoulder, warmth flooded through his mortal flesh, a sense of calm and well-being along with it.

Time ceased to exist as the cord tightened around him. Then Auriel withdrew, and the warmth faded.

"You are concerned," she said after a time. "About me?"

"Never," Tyrael said. He struggled to remain impassive, in keeping with an archangel's bearing. He could not answer her with the truth. When he slept each night, he dreamed as mortals did: not the visions of angels but a far more immersive and fluid state that took him places he had never been. At first, these dreams had been joyous, filled with reflections of the High Heavens and his former immortal existence. But as the nights passed, they began to change, the brilliant light and music of his dreamscapes turning darker, more sinister. He dreamed of something chasing him that he could not outrun, a shadow that was relentless and icy-cold, that clenched him tightly until his beating heart was still. He dreamed of entire human cities being wiped away, the screams of people in agony as their mortal bodies were pulled apart piece by piece, as buildings collapsed and the very ground cracked and tore itself to dust.

Auriel could not possibly understand these dreams. Tyrael was mortal, and the divide between them was too great. And yet his mortal weaknesses led to insights that the rest of the Angiris Council did not possess. The archangels' pride left them unable to sense the danger they faced now.

Auriel coiled Al'maiesh at her side, the ribbon of light becoming one with her being once again. "You are Wisdom," she said. "And yet you do not rest among the pools. You have not yet accepted your role. Your guidance can help us rule the Heavens, should you choose to embrace it."

"And if the Council chooses to listen."

"The others sense your conflict," she said. "They do not understand why you shed your wings. If you are clear about where your allegiance lies—"

"What about the allegiance I have pledged to build between angels and men? Many centuries ago, our votes saved Sanctuary from destruction. Humans have much to offer us now. Without the nephalem, the Prime Evil would have destroyed the Arch, and the Heavens themselves would have fallen!"

"And without humans, such a thing would never have been created," Auriel said, motioning toward the stone on its perch. "The Council will debate this, Tyrael. That is the proper place for such a discussion."

“The debate will change nothing,” Tyrael said. “Imperius will not be swayed from his position. I believe Itherael will vote against Sanctuary’s survival. This is not what I envisioned for our future, my sister. Together, angels and men can push back the darkness forever.”

She turned away as if to go, but Tyrael blocked her path.

“The decision rests with us. Will you stand with me now, as you did before?”

It went against the Council to speak so plainly of this outside of a formal session, and Auriel did not answer. Tyrael sensed a rigidity and coldness in the archangel’s demeanor that he had never felt before. She had always supported the survival of humanity, and he did not understand her silence.

But he feared what such silence might mean.

They stood together for a moment. He had gone too far. Saddened, he stepped aside, and Auriel swept by him without another word. He let her go, the ache in his chest expanding as she disappeared through the arch and left him alone. Their friendship had survived for millennia, and this reaction from her was like a thousand tiny cuts. He felt everything more strongly now, felt the archangels’ growing distrust deep within himself.

Tyrael turned back to the Black Soulstone. It sat silent and lifeless, as if mocking him. He studied it more closely. Its appearance had changed; he was certain. Had it swollen in size since he had first arrived at the chamber?

It is reacting to my presence, just as I suspected. If so, time was already running short, indeed. A darkness has pervaded the Heavens in a way it never has before. This is not like the Prime Evil’s brazen assault on the gates but something far subtler and more insidious . . . a creeping evil that only I can sense.

Wisdom feared for the future of the High Heavens and of Sanctuary and believed now, more than ever, that terrible things were in store for them all.



In the shadows beyond the Angiris Council chamber, Balzael watched Auriel leave, waiting until the glow from her wings faded away to nothing. He had not heard every word.

But he had heard enough.

The halls were silent at this time; angels did not sleep, not the way mortals did, but there were quiet periods of contemplation and study when the music of the Heavens softened and their inhabitants grew

still. By all rights, he should have been among them. But he had been given an important task, and he meant to fulfill his duty.

So far, events had occurred exactly as they had been predicted by the Guardian. Each step would have to be handled perfectly for the Guardian's plans to succeed. Until then, Tyrael must be carefully monitored, regardless of Auriel's recent interference.

Moments later, Tyrael emerged from the chamber. Balzael shrank back, shrouding his wings to keep from being seen. Mortal eyes were weak in many ways, but they picked up the light well. He watched Tyrael walk away from the Council's meeting place, his footsteps echoing in the corridor. The meaty stink of flesh poured off him. Balzael resisted making a snarl of disgust. How such a legendary archangel could fall so far, so quickly, he did not know. But it would not be much longer before the stench was wiped away forever.

Balzael waited until Tyrael's footsteps were faint in the distance and then followed, keeping himself carefully hooded. He would brief the Guardian later and receive counsel on what to do next. Tyrael did not know it, but he would play a vital role in a matter of life and death for angels and men, an end to the Eternal Conflict, the war between the Heavens and the Hells.

Above all, Tyrael must not be allowed to stop the darkness that had begun to creep across the realm of angels.

The future of the Heavens themselves hung in the balance.

PART ONE



The Creeping Dark

Chapter One



The Wanderer, Caldeum

“The entrance to the tomb was black as a thresher’s maw,” the fat man said in a low voice, leaning forward as if imparting a terrible secret. “Our torch revealed only the first few steps before the dark swallowed it up. The smell of rot from the hole spoke of things dead and wanting to stay buried.”

He looked through the smoke-filled, flickering light at the circle of faces turned toward him, making eye contact with each one to draw their attention from the whining notes strummed from the lyre at the far side of the tavern. His frock coat and trousers might have indicated Caldeum gentry, but they were well worn and patched in several places.

The number of those gathered around the fireplace grew by one as a woman in a dress sewn from a root sack tossed a jingling coin into the upturned pigskin cap set on the table. The smell of yeast and sour milk wafted over them as she took a stool.

“What’s this got to do with the boy emperor?” a man called out. “You were going to explain the uprising and the evacuation of the city, you said.”

“No mystery to it,” another said from halfway across the room. “Some say it was a Lord of the Hells raining green fire, but Zakarum priests are in league with the trade consortium council and want new leadership. They were behind it, I say! Lucky for Hakan he survived.”

“Let him tell it,” the woman in the sack dress said, motioning toward the storyteller. She grinned, exposing black gaps where her front teeth should be. “The city’s got troubles enough. We could use a good story or two.”

The bartender, built like a barbarian, scowled and resumed scrubbing the bar with a dirty rag, shaking his head and muttering under his breath.

“It’s no story, I assure you,” the narrator said quickly. “Every word is true.”

The fire was hot at his back. A trickle of sweat ran from a receding hairline down his temple. He nodded once at the woman, his gray-whiskered jowls twitching with the slightest smile, before settling back into a proper expression of abject terror.

“Where was I? Ah, yes. This was the lost tomb of a powerful Horadric mage, mind you, one who had been corrupted by the most *foul* evil and who conspired with *demons*. The mage was long dead, but my master had confirmed through extensive research that his

resting place was surely haunted and protected by deadly spells. We all suspected what might await us belowground was not of this world, and not one—man, woman, or the young lass who had helped lead us to the cursed place—was willing to go first. And yet we had to proceed, because the very fate of Sanctuary itself depended upon it.

“‘Twas then that an *inhuman* cry came from below, like some kind of creature tortured upon the rack and torn limb from limb! The sound of death itself. I was consumed with a fear that bled the strength from my bones, but al-Hazir grabbed the torch from the wizard and marched to the steps. ‘Hurry up, then,’ he said. ‘I may be only a poor travel scribe, but I shall provide the first light upon this black demon’s hole!’”

His voice grew louder as he described the descent into the tomb. The crowd murmured, and the sound of scraping stool legs momentarily drowned out what the fat man said next as more patrons turned to face him. Several more coins jingled into the hat; many listeners shook their heads and laughed at such nonsense, while others smiled uneasily. Caldeum was a city in turmoil, and tales of black magic and demons always served to spark the imaginations of its citizens.

At a table in the corner, about ten feet away, a blond man sat with his hands wrapped around a mug of mead, only the slightest tilt of his head giving any indication that he was also listening. He wore the plain, dust-colored robes of a nomad, a black sash around his waist with the sheath of a short sword tucked into it. The man was slim, his angular features in shadow. Nothing else in particular about him stood out. He did not appear to be a native of Caldeum, but if asked which lands he properly belonged to, nobody in the tavern would have been able to say. Since he had entered the Wanderer, the other patrons had left him alone, as if sensing his reluctance for company.

As the narrator’s tale grew, his stubby arms began waving so wildly that he threatened to topple backward off his stool at any moment. His master, al-Hazir, encountered massive, inhuman beasts made of stone and sand, the storyteller said, and defeated them with his wits when the other adventurers failed with their spells and swords. “Kulle had been beheaded by the Horadrim centuries ago, to keep him from rising from the dead,” the man said. “We found the grisly remains in a ritual chamber, where the witch began her spells in spite of my master’s warnings. Al-Hazir had read the *Demonicus*, written by Zoltun Kulle himself—”

“Aw, get out with you!” the bartender suddenly shouted. He had continued scrubbing furiously at the bar’s scratched and worn surface with the filthy cloth as the fat man rambled on, and his face had grown red with rage. “I’ve heard enough! Peddle your nonsense on the

streets—not in my place of business!”

The lyre player stopped abruptly, and the few remaining patrons who had been ignoring the spectacle around the fireplace turned to stare. The fat man blinked furiously. “Another round, Marley, for your troubles—”

The bartender slapped the cloth down, removing a stained apron and stepping out from behind the bar. He picked up a piece of split wood from a pile by the wall and brandished it like a club, marching toward the narrator. “Not for you. Now, get out, I said.” He waved the wood at the circle of listeners by the fireplace. “The rest of you can go with him and set up on the corner in the cold, if you’re still of a mind to listen to such swill. Or spend your coin to fill your bellies here, where it’s warm.”

The bartender tossed the wood roughly onto the fire. The crowd grumbled as sparks flew up and a cloud of black smoke puffed over those who occupied the circle of stools, making them cough and draw back. Other patrons in the tavern laughed as the storyteller, still protesting, stumbled drunkenly when he rose. He grabbed his hat, nearly spilling the coins as the bartender took his arm while muttering more curses under his breath.

“Go find your master,” the bartender said, and led him toward the exit. “Perhaps he can cast a spell on your tongue to stop it from wagging.”

“I beg you to reconsider,” the storyteller said, making one last stand as the bartender flung the door wide and a gust of icy air blew in. “I have much to tell, things that the people must hear! Al-Hazir has met Tyrael himself, the archangel of Justice—”

“I don’t care if he knows where the boy emperor last shat,” the bartender said. “He won’t do it in here, and neither will you.”

He pushed the fat man out. The door slammed closed, cutting off the cold. For a moment, the fire guttered, casting wavering shadows across the faces of the people watching. None of them moved. Then the bartender motioned to the lyre player, and the off-key melody began again, and people turned back to their drinks, some of them still laughing as the fire crackled and spit.

Nobody noticed when the blond man from the corner table stood a few moments later and quietly slipped to the door, disappearing into the blustery night like a ghost.



Outside, the Wanderer’s weathered wooden sign banged and slapped

against its post, chains rattling in the icy chill. Gusts of wind threw grit from the street in stinging sheets and brought clumps of straw and the smell of dung from nearby stables. Several torches had already gone out, and the evening moon was masked by clouds, adding to the gloom.

Jacob of Staalbreak took a moment to raise the hood of his tunic and tighten it around his neck before squinting through the blowing sand for the storyteller's location. Tyrael, he'd said. The archangel who carried El'druin. The fat man had gotten many of the details surrounding the resurrection of Zoltun Kulle spectacularly wrong; he was a buffoon who had likely never come close to an actual demon. But his casual mention of the archangel as he was being tossed out on his ear had sent a charge through Jacob. He had to know whether there was a kernel of truth to the story.

The proprietor of an alchemist's shop was frantically hammering thick-hewn boards across the shutters to keep them from blowing off. The sound echoed through the empty street like the hollow booms of battle axes falling upon shields. Other than that, the city seemed abandoned, everyone else hunkered down against the storm. Jacob spotted the fat man just before he faded into the darkness, his back hunched against the wind, staggering with drink. Jacob set off, moving quickly and closing the gap.



The storyteller turned a corner and kept going at a regular pace, never looking back. He had emptied the coins into his pocket and set the old cap on his head, and it bobbed with each step. As he walked, his strides steadied. By the time he had reached a muddy street of ramshackle hovels on the outskirts of Caldeum, the fat man was no longer staggering at all, and Jacob was only a few paces behind.

This section of the city near the trade tents was mostly inhabited by day laborers and prostitutes, thieves and madmen, and there were no torches. The shadows deepened, only the vaguest shapes revealed. As drunk as he had appeared, the storyteller did not belong here—even guardsmen did not often come after dark. The dwellings were made of mud and sand, their roofs thatched with cornhusks that hissed and rattled in the wind. The sound masked Jacob's footsteps, but the fat man would not have heard him regardless; he had spent many years learning how to approach his target with stealth and cunning.

Perhaps the loss of the Sword of Justice, El'druin, had left him weaker, Jacob thought, or more desperate. The sword would have

given him a better sense of this man's true intentions. Jacob had been roaming these lands for nearly twenty years, seeking out places where the balance between right and wrong had become skewed, and the archangel Tyrael's sword had become as much a part of him as breathing. Without it, he felt blind to the outcome, fumbling about in the dark until his hands met resistance, and that was a dangerous thing, particularly here, where he might be knifed for his boots.

He was no hero, not anymore. He had never considered himself one, even if others might have disagreed; he had simply dispensed justice the way the sword demanded. But he had come this far, and turning back now made even less sense. He had to see how things would end.

Jacob could barely notice the fat man's bulk as he made for the largest of the dwellings, the only one with any light. A reddish glow flickered from a small window set within the extra-thick mud walls, enough to make the hovel stand out like a beacon in the night. Perhaps the storyteller was drawn to it at random, searching for a warm place away from the storm's icy breath. Or perhaps he did belong here, after all. Although his clothing indicated he might have once had money, no member of Caldeum's gentry would have been caught dead at the Wanderer. These streets stood as the final outpost on the way to oblivion.

Jacob caught him at the door. The fat man, fumbling at the rough, looped clasp of rope that held it shut, startled at the hand on his shoulder and let out a small cry. Jacob turned him and found the man's face bled of all color, white skin standing out like a phantom in the dark. He was about the same height but had two hundred pounds on Jacob, if not more. Still, he wasn't in any condition to present a threat.

"Your story," Jacob said to him. "How does it end?"

"I b-beg your pardon," the fat man stuttered, his piggish eyes bulging as he peered into the shadowed recesses of Jacob's hood. "I—I don't have any money—"

The wind tore a cornhusk free from the roof and sent it tumbling and scratching down to the ground. "What you said back at the Wanderer. What do you know about the archangel Tyrael?"

"I—nothing. I mean, not really. I'm just looking to make coin for a meal." The fat man's eyes squinted, seeming to search for any kind of connection. "Have you been sent here to hunt down poor Abd al-Hazir?"

"Al-Hazir, the travel scribe? Is he inside?"

The confusion on the fat man's face seemed more than was warranted by the question. He opened his mouth as if to answer, but nothing came out. Instead, he made a fumbling move toward the

pocket of his trousers, spilling its contents onto the ground at his feet.

Coins rolled in the dust. "Oh, no," he said, shaking his head and backing away until he was against the door. "Take whatever I have, just leave me be . . . or are you some kind of *demon* come for my life?"

Jacob did not answer him. He scooped up a medallion that had dropped from the man's pocket and held it aloft by the gold chain. It winked in the red glow from the window. The surface was inscribed with the image of scales, an alchemist's charm. A chill ran through Jacob as his heart skipped a beat.

"Where did you get this?"

A moan drifted across the dark. At first, Jacob thought it might be the wind around the eaves, but it came from within the dwelling.

There was nothing but the rustle and hiss of corn for a long moment.

And then came a woman's high, piercing scream.



The fat man moved faster than Jacob had thought possible. He glanced at the window, and when he looked back, the door to the dwelling was yawning open, and the storyteller was gone.

Jacob shoved the medallion into his tunic and stepped through the doorway, into the deep gloom. The smell of rotten meat was thick in the air. He slipped the hood from his face and drew a short sword, a family heirloom, from its sheath, holding the worn wooden grip with the blade pointed out. The front room was completely bare except for a bale of hay in one corner. A stone fireplace stood next to it, but the coals were cold and long dead.

The man was nowhere to be seen. The red glow was coming from another room, deeper inside the home. Jacob paused, listening, just outside a second door that hung open a crack. He could hear rustlings from the other side.

Whatever you might find in there is not worth the risk. And yet he felt compelled to follow the storyteller. The medallion . . . and the woman screaming. It meant something important. He pushed the door open. The door squealed like a stuck pig as it swung wide, ticking against the wall where it came to rest.

Inside the next room, a half-circle of sticklike shadows stood around a bound figure on a chair, slender and clearly female. A filthy cape had been draped across her shoulders, and a sack had been tied around her neck, masking her face. The shadows were men in dark robes, and they held long, curved, wicked-looking knives that gleamed

blood-red in the light from glowing runes drawn on the worn wooden floorboards. Jacob did not recognize the runes, but the ritual they described would surely end in bloodshed.

It was not the first time this room had been used for evil. He recoiled, breath catching in his throat, which had suddenly gone dry. Spatters of old blood, black as pitch, speckled the walls and floor.

Cultists, in service to the witch.

He had thought the Coven had been wiped out by now, or at least scattered to the wind after Maghda's death. Jacob held still, his sword out, his heart racing. His long-dead father's words came back to him: *Don't go rushing in like a wounded bull unless you want it to be your last fight.* He had broken a basic rule, one he had followed faithfully before. He considered turning to run; Jacob was no match for them, not anymore. He was no longer the avatar of Justice now that El'druin was gone, vanishing in the night and leaving him powerless.

But if he ran, the woman would die. *She is an innocent.* He could not let that happen.

The room was silent for a beat, and then the men turned their hooded faces toward him as one. The creak of the chair as the woman struggled sounded desperate and ugly, and Jacob could almost feel the cold bite of the cultists' blades as if they were against his own flesh, sense his lifeblood leaking out and painting the floor red.

A noise came from behind him. Jacob whirled and found the fat man had somehow gotten around to flank him, although he couldn't have missed him on the way through. The man now stood blocking the exit, meaty arms folded across his chest.

The fat man chuckled and shook his head. "Jacob of Staalbreak."

"How do you know my name?"

"You have gotten lazy in your *retirement*. Did you really think it would be such an easy thing, robbing me of the spoils of my labors? Did you think I would tell you everything you want to know without a fight?"

"Do I—Have we met?"

The fat man chuckled again. "Not in this flesh."

He reached up and clawed at his face, running his nails through puffy jowls, pulling his own skin down in long yellow strings that stretched and cracked like clay in the sun. Exposed beneath it was a dripping monstrosity of glistening sinew and muscle and horned bone, red eyes glowing as if with the fires of the Hells far beneath their feet.

"Bar'aguil," Jacob whispered. He had encountered this demon before, years ago. The Burning Hells had been pushed back, but their minions were still wandering Sanctuary and thirsting for innocents' blood. He thought back to the tavern, the casual mention of Tyrael; with little effort, the seemingly bumbling fool had drawn him out into

the storm. A trap had been set, and he had walked right into it.

And the medallion? The chill in Jacob's blood deepened. What that meant was too terrible to imagine—

"Murderer," the demon hissed, moving forward. The flesh of the former storyteller hung from his glowing face like a grotesque mask. "Hypocrite. *Monster*. You have hunted us for years. It is time to repay the favor."

"Maghda is dead. And Belial is long gone."

"We are in service to new masters now." The demon scuttled ahead like an insect, then stopped, cocking his head at Jacob. "You would be surprised to hear of it. But you won't live that long. Do you know what we'll do, murderer? Do you know where you will end up, once we are finished with your bones?"

Jacob swung the sword one way and then the other, trying to keep both sides at bay. The hooded cultists had also shifted toward him, and he felt the old squeeze of panic begin low in his belly.

When one of them leaped at him, Jacob barely had time to turn fully in that direction before his attacker was draped across his shoulders, his foul breath in his face, the smell of meat heavy and sour.

The weight of the man's body drove Jacob down. But he had gotten the blade under the cultist's ribs. Yanking upward as he fell, Jacob felt a hot gush of blood wet his robe. They landed hard. The man grunted and moaned, twitching, his legs shuddering against the floor.

Before he could push the dying cultist away, the others had Jacob by the arms, lifting him and twisting cruelly at his sword hand until he dropped the blade. The two largest ones pinned him against the wall, feet off the ground, as Bar'aguil approached, face dripping blood and fat, demon eyes glowing in the shadows. Bar'aguil reached out a hand, the tips of the fingers now split like cooked sausages, claws extending from them and ending in curved points.

"You shall pay for that," the creature hissed, bloody foam and spittle forming where the storyteller's lips had been. "Your precious archangel's sword cannot protect you now. Tyrael is dead, and judgment rains down on Sanctuary! Men shall suffer. And we shall emerge from the ashes, stronger than ever."

The runes on the floor pulsed red. The demon gripped Jacob by the throat. Claws sliced into his flesh, and he choked as his air was slowly cut off, stars winking deep within his eyes, the whirl of lights growing brighter until they threatened to consume everything that he knew and loved . . .

He wasn't sure what happened next. The lights in his head shifted to somewhere beyond him, and when he came fully back to himself, the demon had let him go, and his feet were on the ground.

He gasped for air, bringing oxygen into his lungs with hot, ragged breaths.

Bar'aguil had turned with the other members of the Coven to face the figure who had been strapped to the chair. She stood upright, arms free, the remains of her bindings lying in tatters on the floor. Between cupped hands was a brilliant ball of purple flame. But Jacob's eyes were fixed on the woman's beautiful face.

"Shanar?"

"Duck," the wizard said. She released the ball of pure arcane energy with a flick of her delicate wrist, sending it spinning toward the nearest cultist. As the energy hit the man in the chest, it exploded into pieces, and Jacob threw himself to the floor, covering his head.

When he looked up again, ears ringing, there were only two hooded figures left standing with Bar'aguil. The demon snarled in rage, leaping forward with his claws extended as if he meant to rip the wizard's head from her shoulders with a single massive blow.

A glowing bubble of light burst forth around Shanar, enveloping the demon and the remaining cultists along with her. Their movements slowed to a crawl while she moved with stunning speed, summoning spikes of crackling energy in her hands and throwing them like glittering purple spears, dancing around the helpless creatures caught in her web.

And then, only moments after it had begun, it was over.

The bubble of light faded. The remains of the fat man who had been inhabited by Bar'aguil lay torn nearly in half and bleeding on the floor, dead cultists arranged around him like some kind of macabre display.

Shanar stood at the center of the carnage, bare shoulders back, beautiful breasts heaving against a leather corset. She had cut her dark hair to shoulder length, but otherwise, she was unchanged from the woman Jacob had lusted after, not a wrinkle or blemish after twenty years.

Shanar met his gaze with the familiar defiance that had always driven him crazy, in every sense of the word. "Same old story," she said. "Saving your hide is getting old, Jacob. I waited as long as I could, but a girl gets tired of being tied up after a while."

"You could have sped things up a bit," Jacob said, getting gingerly to his feet and recovering his sword, wiping it clean. He touched the shallow cuts on his neck from Bar'aguil's claws, looked at his fingers. The bleeding had stopped, but the sting to his pride remained.

"Where's the fun in that?" With the barest hint of a smile on her lips, Shanar stepped delicately over the nearest body. "I needed you to come hither, and I had to wait for the demon to reveal himself to be sure it was time to act. Of course, you were supposed to save the

damsel in distress and redeem your own sorry skin. Best-laid plans . . .” She extended a hand. “Now, before we’re overwhelmed by nostalgia and drift off, I believe you have something that belongs to me.”

Jacob dug in his tunic and produced her father’s medallion, one of the few items of any tangible value that were precious to her. The symbol of the alchemist. Shanar had told him a story once about removing it from around her dead father’s neck before the coffin went into the ground. He had never seen her without it.

“When I saw this, I was afraid that it meant that you . . .” He let the sentence hang in the air. Even after all these years, he wasn’t good at expressing how he felt about her. It was one of many things that had finally driven them apart.

“Reports of my death have been seriously exaggerated,” Shanar said. She took the medallion and tucked it away. “I let the demon take it; it served a purpose. I knew I’d survive long enough to get it back. You, however . . .” She studied him, and he thought he sensed some tenderness there, although perhaps he was just imagining it. “You look a bit worn around the edges.”

“It’s been a long year. What are you doing in this part of town?”

“Not here,” she said, glancing at the carnage. The runes had begun to fade away, and the darkness was leaching in. She picked up a wizard’s staff that had been placed at the center of the circle, hidden by the runes until now. “Outside.”



The front room was blacker than the night beyond it. Shanar muttered a few words and raised a ball of blue light on the end of her staff. It lit the darkness, and Jacob followed her as she flung the front door wide, the sudden icy wind whipping through them like a banshee, cutting through his bones, and bringing in the stinging grit from the street.

“Wait,” he said. “You still haven’t explained what you were doing here.”

Shanar sighed, as if he were asking a great favor. “Remember when you found that cave with El’druin waiting for you, and I was waiting there, too?”

He nodded. “You carved my life story on the walls.”

“I followed the resonance of the Crystal Arch,” she said. “The Heavens led me to you and the sword, and all these years later, they’ve led me here. I’m not sure why, but considering the circumstances, I figured I ought to listen.”

A familiar charge ran through him. "I . . . I thought I'd never see you again."

"That was the plan." Shanar shivered, hunching her shoulders. "But plans change. Whether we like it or not." She turned away again, heading out the door.

"Where are you going?" he called after her.

"To pick up an old friend," she said over the wind. "Come on. I'll explain more on the way, but there's no time to lose. We leave tonight —"

He reached out and grabbed her arm. "Hold it, Shanar. Just like that, you come back into my life and expect me to follow you like nothing happened?"

The wizard shrugged away his hand. "Look, I know we've got some unfinished business between us, but you've got a choice: keep wallowing in your own self-pity and drink away your sorrows for another fortnight, or come with me for another adventure, just like old times. Who knows? I followed the resonance once, and it led me to El'druin. Maybe the sword's calling me again, and it wants me to bring you along."

With that, she turned once again and disappeared into the night.

Jacob stood on the threshold, torn. That was a cheap shot, he thought. She knew what the loss of the sword had meant to him, knew how he would feel if she even hinted that he might find it again.

And yet what did he really have to lose? She was right: he'd been wallowing in self-pity for too long. There was nothing here for him in Caldeum. Seeing her had brought back all the old feelings. He wanted to see her face again.

And perhaps, just perhaps, El'druin was waiting along with Shanar.

Jacob pulled his hood up against the stinging wind and went after her.

Chapter Two



Tristram, Several Weeks Later

The monk paused at the top of a rise, motioning to his two companions to hold back. He looked out across a ruined landscape, searching for signs of danger. The small valley was still. Dusk had begun to give way to night, and a half-moon had broken through the clouds enough to outline the stunted, skeletal trees that stretched their bony fingers toward the blackened sky.

More than enough to expose the ruins of the old cathedral that lay scattered across the next hill.

The once-proud structure had been devastated by the archangel's plunge like a fallen star from the Heavens. The gods had shown it to the monk in a vision—a streaking river of light through the sky. The spire and walls mostly remained, but a hole in the ground gaped open like a ragged mouth, exposing the top levels of the secret catacombs that lay far beneath the foundation. Broken arch supports stuck up through the rubble, crumbling piles of wood and stone everywhere. Fire had ravaged some of the interior, but under the faint moonlight, Mikulov could see several rows of wooden pews intact, as if waiting for a congregation to fill them again.

He had dreamed of all this many times. But to see it in the flesh, to smell the charred remains on the wind and feel the rot at its core, was something else entirely.

The gods were silent now. He did not blame them for leaving this forsaken place.



The two men who had traveled with Mikulov waited for his signal that all was clear and then labored to the top of the hill. Their training had kept them in better shape than most, but none could match the legendary physical conditioning of an Ivgorod monk, and the journey from Gea Kul in Kehjistan had been long and exhausting. The heavy satchels slung across their shoulders added to the burden, but neither of them would think of giving them up. They were Horadrim, and the texts they carried were as essential as the blood that ran through their veins.

Cullen reached the top first and gazed out at the ruins. The short man pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. He had studied

Cain's texts for years and had always wanted to see the Tristram Cathedral, but only one who knew him well would have sensed the excitement that lay beneath his seemingly calm demeanor.

Thomas slung his pack to the ground and touched Cullen's arm. The taller man's eyes sparkled in the twilight.

"The history that lies here," he said. "If we were to gain access to the lower levels—"

"That would be unwise." Mikulov turned to his companions. "They are unstable. And I have yet to scout the surroundings. Sanctuary may have been purged of the Prime Evil, but lesser demons still wander these lands. We must be very careful."

"Then we search for the pyre," Thomas said. "We must build a shrine, even a humble one, if none stands. He deserves nothing less."

Mikulov studied the faces of his friends. Cullen, the scholar, still had the familiar boyish features below a bald crown, but his cheeks had hollowed some during the long, hard journey. Thomas was a foot taller than his companion and much thinner, but his eyes held the confident stare of a warrior. The men had changed much since Mikulov had left them in Gea Kul after the defeat of the Dark One and the fall of the Black Tower. The monk wondered how they viewed him.

"Stay here," he said. "The gods are silent. I must find out why."



The two Horadrim watched the monk slip away down the hill, darting between the remains of trees and disappearing into the gloom. As always, Cullen thought, he moved like a ghost; even the moon refused to reveal him. Cullen remembered feeling a mixture of unease and awe when he'd first met Mikulov more than ten years ago.

Those feelings hadn't changed upon the monk's return to Gea Kul and the new Horadric temple some months ago. Mikulov had seemed surprised to find a thriving center for scholarly study in Gea Kul, established with a growing group of Horadrim led by Thomas and Cullen. He should not have been; Deckard Cain had become a legend among the group after the fall of the Black Tower, and they had pledged to do what he asked of them when he left. They followed his teachings and writings closely.

Mikulov had joined with the others studying the ancient texts, but he remained restless. The gods had shown him many things during his travels these past ten years, he had said, but he had yet to learn his true destiny. Then a new vision had come to him one evening as he

explored the ruins of the tower where the final battle with the Dark One had been fought, where Mikulov had nearly become one with all things. He had been confronted by a holy stranger shrouded in light, he said, the embodiment of the gods themselves, who told him he must travel to Tristram and seek out the cathedral's ruins.

It was not like the gods to appear in such a form, he had said. But he would not speak more on the vision. Whatever he had seen disturbed him enough to keep him silent. But he was determined to seek out the old cathedral, and when he had asked Thomas and Cullen to accompany him—told them that the fate of Sanctuary itself depended on it—they had readily agreed.

Our friend spent years wandering Sanctuary in search of truth and avoided a good many Ivgorod assassins along the way. He's earned the benefit of the doubt. If his gods have called him to the cathedral, that's good enough for me.

Of course, that wasn't the only reason they had come.

"I'd always imagined the cathedral to be . . . larger," Thomas said. "More impressive."

"We've spent years studying what happened here. It's of seminal importance to our entire purpose. And it's been touched by fire."

Thomas stared past the ruins. He was silent for a long moment, his eyes wandering across the scorched hills. Cullen knew what he was searching for. "Deckard lies near the burying ground, where his body was brought to ash in a great pyre of holy smoke and fire," he said. "The archangel Tyrael himself witnessed it. That's what was written to us by Leah, before she . . . before her loss, and I have no reason to doubt it." He slung his satchel to the ground and dug into the bottom for a map, one of the faithful reproductions of Tristram that they had made themselves at the temple. Cullen was in charge of old and new texts, cataloging the Horadrim's extensive library and overseeing the lettering and binding of copies of those that were threatening to crumble to dust, and this was one of his best.

He spread the map across a thick root that protruded like a black serpent from the rocky soil, muttering a few words of power under his breath. The markings began to glow softly, revealing crude drawings of the cathedral and its surroundings.

Crude but carefully marked. This was a copy from an authentic Horadric scroll, and he had updated it himself from more recent information. From this angle, the graveyard would be located beyond the ruins. Cullen tucked it away as the markings faded and peered through the faint moonlight. His heart thudded heavily in his chest. "Perhaps we could take just a short walk—"

"Don't move."

Cullen felt the edge of a blade against his neck.

Thomas had half drawn his sword but held it motionless. He was watching someone just behind Cullen's right shoulder, and his eyes made a single flick down and to Cullen's left. Cullen knew what he wanted. His assailant was left-handed, and the proper twisting move could free Cullen enough for Thomas to strike.

But the blade was held tightly against Cullen's flesh and made such a move extremely dangerous.

Cullen made a small sound low in his throat, and the man behind him shifted slightly. The blade bit down before the moon brightened the ground for a moment.

"A necromancer," Thomas said. He slid the sword slowly back into place and showed his hands. "Release my friend. We've no quarrel with you. We're Horadrim, come from Kehjistan. What business do you have here?"

The blade remained in place, and Cullen closed his eyes, waiting for the pulse of his own hot blood rolling down his throat. But eventually, the knife withdrew.

"Beggars and thieves, more likely," a voice said, different from the first. "I'd sleep with one eye open, 'twas up to me. 'Course, I've no choice in the matter. I go where you carry me."

Cullen turned, expecting to find two men, but he found only one. His assailant was slim and pale as death, black bangs slashed above a bearded, solemn face. He wore a cloak with silver runes stitched along its edge; a black glove was on his right hand, bone dagger clutched in his left. The blade glowed with an eerie blue light. But his strangest features were his eyes, which were a pale gray and luminescent like tiny twin moons.

This was a man filled with a quiet but dangerous power. His leather boots did not make a sound on the gravel-packed soil.

Cullen had met one or two necromancers in his time, and their practice of the dark arts always put people on edge. They rarely showed emotion and tended to keep to themselves. But this one was even more unsettling, for reasons that he couldn't quite understand. Perhaps it was the fact that he'd just had a knife at Cullen's throat.

And, of course, there was the matter of the second voice.

"Your companion," Cullen said. "Where did he go?"

The necromancer slid his gloved hand toward a fat pouch on his belt the size of a melon. "There's no one else."

"A fine hello, that is," the slightly muffled voice said indignantly. "I can't very well shake their hands myself. Ashamed, are you? I'm like the hunchbacked aunt the family keeps locked in the root cellar so as not to scare the neighbors."

"Hush," the necromancer said. He patted the pouch.

"I've been quiet too long," the voice continued. "It's dark in here

and none too roomy. Smells like the ass end of a mule, if you don't mind me saying."

The necromancer seemed to hesitate slightly and then unbuckled the pouch to remove a human skull missing its lower jaw. Cullen stumbled backward, and Thomas let out a cry, drawing his sword as if to ward it off.

Empty eye sockets gleamed white in the moonlight. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance," the skull said.

Chapter Three



The Necromancer

The two men had identified themselves as Horadrim, and the sign of the order was stitched on their satchels. They certainly appeared to be humble scholars of some kind, based on their simple dress: pale brown robes over gray tunics belted at the waist, sandals on their feet. There had been rumors of a new clan attempting to establish itself somewhere in Kehjistan, and the necromancer had recently seen a good-quality reproduction of a Horadric text in Westmarch that the bookshop proprietor claimed had been shipped from Gea Kul. But the true order had supposedly died out long ago.

The shorter one had nearly lost his spectacles as he scrambled away from the skull, and he set them back up on his nose with a finger, blinking rapidly. “Who—*what*—are you?”

“I had an unfortunate turn of fate while robbing a lost city,” the skull said. “The pleasant fellow here who threatened you at knifepoint—Zayl, his name is—raised my spirit to help guide him to the proper location—”

“Enough, Humbart,” the necromancer said. He was uneasy in these surroundings, although he would never show it. Tristram was forever bound to the darkness in ways he would rather not confront quite yet. *Chaos and ruin live in this place*, he thought, *and these men are searching for answers, too.*

Zayl thought back on the past year with regret. He did not often judge his life based on his past or on fate alone. His time to depart this world would come when it was ready and not a moment sooner. But lately, it seemed that chaos had been given free rein. The absence of the Worldstone continued to affect the mortal realm; the demon hordes had come farther east than ever before and threatened his birthplace in the eastern jungles. He and his brethren had fought them off, but once again, Zayl had found himself drawn far from his home in search of the disruption in the Balance. He had sensed that the source for the uprising lay to the west, and that the Lesser Evils Belial and Azmodan would come from the Burning Hells to invade Sanctuary.

He had fought for the side of light in Caldeum as that city nearly fell to Belial’s cunning, although he had never met the people who ultimately brought Belial down. Rumors of demons breaking through the Diamond Gates of the Heavens, gathered from the possessed soul of a guardsman, made him fear that the Great Cycle of Being would be permanently altered.

But if such an invasion had occurred, Hell's minions must have been turned away by the angelic guard, or the ground beneath men's feet would have been split asunder. Instead, the world began to settle again toward a semblance of normalcy. He had left Caldeum, searching for more answers, and ended up in Westmarch.

The last time Zayl had been called there, he had very nearly been killed by the spider demon Astrogha. He had also, Zayl hated to admit, fallen in love. It was not something that often happened to necromancers, and the feeling had left him vulnerable. Abandoning Salene back then had been one of the most difficult things he had ever done, but it had been necessary. A priest of Rathma worked alone.

Yet I was so eager to return. Perhaps Salene was the reason, after all. If so, he had broken a cardinal rule of the priesthood—putting his own needs before his calling—and made a terrible mistake.

He had sensed a growing unrest among the proud people of Westmarch. Although most of the citizens were suspicious of members of his kind, he had overheard enough to gather the meaning: there were rumors of an underground religious order that was swiftly gathering power and recruits, and tension was rising between it and the knights. And there was talk of disappearances, always of someone else's kin.

Zayl had wasted little time tracking down Lady Salene, telling himself she would hold important information that might help him find the answers he was seeking. Humbart hadn't been fooled for a second; he knew the true reason lay in the shadowed depths of Zayl's heart. Salene had never married, and in spite of General Torion's mild objections over his reappearance, her feelings for him were apparent.

When he had found her, now a lady of the court, and they were together, it felt as if no time had passed. She forgave him for leaving her, she said. She had always held out hope for his return and had never stopped waiting.

Then the dark-winged creatures had come for her in the night.

In spite of himself, Zayl shivered. The slight tremor of emotion would not have been noticed by anyone save another Rathmian and perhaps Humbart, who was closer to him than any living being. But it reminded him of his weakness, so recently exposed.

His true regret lay in what he had done next, after he had been too late to save her. He should have known better than to let his personal feelings affect him. *There is a new threat to this world, Salene's spirit had told him, one that may make all others pale in comparison, for its only goal is to wipe humankind from existence forever. You have been called to the old cathedral in Tristram by a very powerful mortal, one who will ask you to join him in a dangerous mission. You must go with him to find Borad the blacksmith in Bramwell. He holds the key that you seek.*

Zayl had not questioned her message; it was not in him to do so. His destiny lay here, among the ruins. Now, more than a month later, the anguish over her loss was stronger than ever. Necromancers were not supposed to view death as a tragedy, but Zayl mourned Salene like no other. His undying love for her had led him to this forsaken place.

If you cannot find the way, Rathma had allegedly said, *wait, and the way will find you.*

“Horadrim, you say?” the skull continued, bringing Zayl back from his dark memories. “I’ve not heard of your kind since the fall of Tristram. Are you certain you’re not possessed?”

“Pardon my traveling companion’s blunt approach,” Zayl said. “But in this case, I fear it’s warranted. As for my business, I might ask you the same.”

The men had recovered quickly from their fright but still eyed the skull and the necromancer with some distaste and kept their distance. Zayl was used to such a reception; Rathmian priests were distrusted in these lands, their dark arts feared by those who misunderstood them. Necromancers dabbled in life and death and knew how to manipulate the line between the two. Raising spirits certainly did not make one many friends.

“We seek the resting place of the founder of our order, Deckard Cain.” The shorter one took a step closer. “My name is Cullen, and this is Thomas. We’re also traveling with an Ivgorod monk.”

Zayl was surprised by this. He had not seen anyone else, which meant that the monk must be very skilled indeed.

“May I?” Cullen’s curiosity was apparently overcoming his revulsion as he glanced at Humbart, then at the necromancer. Zayl hesitated just a moment before he handed the skull over.

“Fascinating,” the man said, turning and examining Humbart, which provoked a startled exclamation and a string of curses from the skull. Cullen gave it back quickly, wiping his fingers on his tunic as if to clear them of some foul stain. “I’ve studied such things, of course, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen—”

His words were interrupted by a commotion near the ruins of the cathedral. Raised voices were followed by the sound of clashing swords ringing across the shallow valley that separated them. Zayl tucked Humbart into the sack on his belt and drew his bone dagger as Thomas and Cullen scrambled forward and down the slope toward the next rise.

The trees here seemed to grasp at their clothing with dead hands, and the ground was unstable, rolling stones and shifting clumps of black soil under their feet. But Zayl moved with grace, his boots easily picking out the solid spots so that he was quickly outpacing the other men.

As they approached the next rise, the sounds of the skirmish ceased. Wind gusted through the valley, dust swirling around them. Zayl stopped for a moment to let it pass. When the air cleared and the moon returned, four figures were coming down the gentle slope to meet them, the Ivgorod monk leading the others. His bald head gleamed; he wore cloth wrapped around his heavily muscled chest, with a yellow sash knotted at his waist, armor around his forearms, and a string of wooden beads around his neck. A formidable presence, Zayl decided. He moved with confidence and purpose and with a quiet sense of strength. *A warrior you would be better served to have on your side.*

The others behind him walked three abreast: a female wizard next to a slim male figure with blond hair and dressed in a nomad's worn robes and, slightly apart from them, a barbarian who towered over her companions by at least a foot, her impressive curves accentuated by the armor that clung to her breasts and waist and left the flesh of her hips exposed. She held a battle axe across her shoulder that must have weighed nearly as much as Zayl himself, and yet she carried it with ease.

"What's happening?" complained the voice from his sack. "A little narration, if you please? There's dark magic about this place. I'd like to know if you're about to get an arrow through you!"

Zayl glanced back at Cullen and Thomas, who were nearly caught up now. "We have company," he said. "This time, let me do the talking."



The monk, whose name was Mikulov, had surprised the three new arrivals as they approached the other side of the ruins.

The wizard was named Shanar, the slim blond man was Jacob, and the barbarian introduced herself as Gynvir. The barbarian was older than he'd guessed at first glance, Zayl thought, but well preserved. The blond man was a bit ragged around the edges, but the wizard, the youngest of the three, was slender and remarkably beautiful.

They had also been called here for some purpose that was unclear. "The High Heavens' Crystal Arch has a resonance—a song," Shanar said after the introductions were made. "I'm able to tap into it, and the resonance . . . it speaks to me. I can't make it plainer than that."

"I've studied texts that describe the Arch," Cullen said, eyes brightening. "The resonance gives birth to angels, the legends say. Deckard wrote about it in a seminal volume of our order. And you

found a way to *sense* this, here on Sanctuary?"

Shanar nodded. "The song flows through all of us, shapes the destiny of mortals in mysterious ways—a vibration like a struck fork, felt only in the ether that surrounds us. Most people can't sense it. The song led me here, to Tristram." She gestured toward Jacob and the barbarian. "Their presence was . . . required. The resonance made that pretty clear."

Gynvir in particular seemed wary of the necromancer, her hands tightening on her battle axe. "What is *he* doing here?" she said, glaring at Zayl before glancing back at Shanar. "You told me we were needed to save Sanctuary from evil, and you know I'll fight to the death for that. But I didn't sign up to be in the presence of one of his kind."

Barbarians were a superstitious, spiritual people, fiercely loyal to their duty to protect the Worldstone. After Mount Arreat had been destroyed and the stone was thought lost forever, many had taken to searching for conflict to assuage the emptiness in their hearts. Denied a proper warrior's burial on the slopes of their beloved mountain, they were wanderers from then on, and death was no longer something they cared to understand in such an intimate way.

"Please, I mean you no harm," Zayl said. "I'm here for the same reasons you are, to battle against the darkness and restore the Balance."

"Pah." The barbarian spit in the dust. "If you try any of your dark spells around me, you'll taste the edge of my axe. I'll ask you again, necromancer, what are you doing in Tristram?"

"Hunting barbarians," Humbart said from Zayl's pouch. "What else?"

The barbarian swung her weapon into place before her sizable chest, holding it in a double-handed grip. "Who spoke?" she said, looking around wildly. "Reveal yourself!"

Zayl sighed. He attempted a small smile, more to put the barbarian at ease than through any sense of friendliness. But smiling didn't come naturally to him, and from her reaction, he supposed the effect was more like a baring of teeth. He regretted Humbart's attempt at humor and didn't particularly enjoy making others uncomfortable, but he wasn't ready to volunteer more information just yet. This chance meeting was entirely too convenient. More would be revealed soon, Zayl was sure, but until then, he would remain silent.

As if in answer, a bright light flared briefly in the dark, outlining the remains of the cathedral from the other side. Along with it came a ripple in the Balance; Zayl felt it wash over him, and a muttered curse came from Humbart, who was far more attuned to these changes than any living mortal. It meant the presence of something not of this world, something powerful that was in league with either the Heavens

or the Hells and threatened the natural equilibrium between light and darkness.

Who or what this was, he could not say, but he had the sense they would all soon find out.

The monk led the charge back up the hill. They reached the top as the light began to fade, skirting the edge of the fallen cathedral to the graveyard on the other side. Stones leaned crookedly in every direction, their markings worn to faint lines and shadows. But all eyes were on what would have been the graveyard's entrance.

A pillar of fresh white stone, twice the height of a man, rose up from the ground, a beautifully carved monument in perfect symmetry, squared edges running up to a triangular top with markings etched across it. The same symbol that appeared on the two men's satchels.

The sign of the Horadrim.



As the wind changed, the smell of charred wood was carried over to them. The remains of a burning lay at the foot of the monument. Thomas and Cullen rushed forward with the others close behind them, leaving Zayl at the graveyard's edge. The world fell silent for a moment.

"Have they left us, then?"

"They haven't gone far, Humbart," Zayl said, his voice low. "Don't antagonize them, please. I have enough to handle without having to explain your rather odd sense of humor."

"That's the least of your problems," Humbart said, muffled by the sack. "Forgive me, but you seem to be acting a bit daft. First, chasing after those things that took Salene—"

"That's no business of yours," Zayl said. His voice held an edge.

"It needs saying. We've been together too long for me to cut words. You've lost her, and that's a terrible thing. I lost a woman I loved . . ." The skull trailed off a moment. "You shouldn't have called her spirit and gone racing off, and it's led us to this hellhole where the ground's stained with both human and demon blood. Coming here won't bring Salene back, and now you've run into a bunch of wanderers and thieves without a thought to our safety. One might think you're looking to speed up your own end."

"This is about restoring the Balance between order and chaos. My time will come—"

"When it's ready and not before," the skull interrupted. "Of course it will. And maybe that time is here and now, eh? Maybe you'd

welcome it.”

Zayl had to admit that Humbart might have a point. But now his skin prickled; it was the same feeling he’d had a few moments earlier but stronger this time. There was someone else nearby. Someone very powerful indeed. The Balance was threatened, but whether this being was aligned with light or the darkness was not yet clear.

He approached the others, who had gathered around the monument. The monk and his two companions seemed nearly overcome with grief. *The Horadrim’s fallen leader Deckard Cain lies here*, Zayl thought. But if they had come to put up a shrine, then who had carved the stone that already stood in place?

Humbart made a small sound at his side. Zayl looked to his right to see a figure approaching over the crest of the hill dressed in armor and flowing robes, broad-shouldered and shaved bald, bearing the scars of battle across his lined and handsome face.

He carried a rucksack and walked with slow purpose, and his expression did not change. If he saw Zayl watching him, he did not acknowledge it.

Zayl might have felt alarmed at this, but for some reason, he did not. One by one, the others noticed the man and turned to stare. He came to a stop before them. The stranger radiated a sense of calm, quiet strength, of well-being and light. Trag’Oul had spoken, Zayl thought; the Balance was restored here, if only briefly, and Zayl realized that under his feet, in defiance of the rest of this corrupted ground, grass had begun to push through the rocky soil.

“Welcome, warriors of the light,” the stranger said. “I am Tyrael of the Angiris Council, and I have come to ask for your help. The High Heavens and all of Sanctuary are in danger, and you”—he looked at each in turn with a gaze that appeared to pierce them to their very core—“are the only hope we have left.”

Chapter Four



The Angiris Council, Several Weeks Earlier

Wisdom dreamed of the death of men.

Tyrael slept on a bed of cold marble. In his dreams, the End of Days came swiftly. Black tar dripped and pooled, spreading its tendrils through clouds that swelled across a bright blue sky. The light that was cast upon the ground changed, and the world of Sanctuary began to tremble. Screams of countless mortals rose up through the dust as fissures erupted from soil. Mankind's greatest creations, towers of wood and stone and brick, tumbled in pieces to the ground, crushing bodies beneath them. Entire cities disappeared as yawning caverns opened up, swallowing them whole. Oceans boiled and turned red with blood.

Still, the minions of the Burning Hells did not burst forth, for this was not their doing. Rays of brilliant light cut through the black clouds that roiled and churned above the wreckage. A horde of angels descended upon the destruction they had wrought, blanketing the skies and butchering any remaining survivors with ruthless conviction, one by one.



Tyrael awoke in a cold sweat, blinking away the sting. He touched his face, looking at the moisture on his fingers, wondering at what he saw.

You weep for your fellow mortals.

The archangel had never wept before. He stood, his joints aching from the stone floor, and stretched his back, feeling the muscles tense and release. So many experiences were new to him, and each one gave him pause. He tried to let go of the darkness from the dream, but it clung to him like a shroud. It had not been long since the fall of the Prime Evil and Tyrael's proclamation that a new age of angels and men living in peace had begun. Today the Angiris Council would once again fall into heated debate over the role of mankind in the Eternal Conflict.

Angels were as much a threat to Sanctuary as the Hells. It seemed that Tyrael had been terribly wrong in his prediction. How had it come to this, and so quickly?

It is the stone's influence.

Sanctuary had been secretly created by Inarius eons ago, and the archangels had debated Sanctuary's fate ever since. Imperius would never be swayed in his opinion that it must be destroyed. Even Tyrael himself had held similar beliefs, centuries ago, before humanity had proved itself

capable of greatness.

But it was not Imperius whom mankind should fear, Tyrael thought as he made his way toward the Council chamber. A dark foreboding lingered as he walked alone through the Heavens. The archangel of Valor's opinion was already well known. But Auriel . . . she would cast the crucial vote. If she remained in favor of Sanctuary's existence, there was a chance Itherael would side with her. Even if he did not, without Malthael's presence, they would be deadlocked, and the vote would be set aside according to Council law.

He had tried to speak to Auriel again after she had interrupted his confrontation with Balzael. Outside the Gardens of Hope, he had been met by one of her angelic host and was told she was in repose and would not see him. The gardens were a place of peace and tranquility, where angels sat in deep meditation and in search of balance under a heavenly chorus that set the trees shimmering with light and sound. Auriel would not bring this conflict in here, her guard said. The angel had given him a symbol of peace in a light flower to adorn his robes, as she would for any visitor to the gardens, but her tone was dismissive; would she have acted this way before Tyrael had shed his wings?

It was not like Auriel to refuse him, even under these circumstances. He had left the gardens without protest, but what he had seen there was chilling. The trees continued to shimmer with light, but some of that light had been tainted with the faintest streaks of gray, as if . . .

No. He could not think this way. Perhaps the real problem was within, and his new mortality and the rush of strange emotions he was feeling had something to do with it. Was his decision to rejoin the Angiris Council as a mortal shortsighted after all? Was he no longer fit to rule as Wisdom, or any other?

Tyrael made his way to the Council chamber. Imperius met him outside the entrance.

The archangel of Valor was surrounded by members of the Luminarei guard—one of them Balzael, who stepped forward as Tyrael approached. He appeared about to speak, but Imperius swept his second-in-command aside as he strode up to Tyrael, wings extended in a blaze of light. "Your attempts to persuade our sister to join your side were misguided," he said. "It is forbidden to pursue a debate in the days before it is taken up in a Council session. You have jeopardized the entire Council with your recklessness. Has your mortal flesh clouded your vision?"

Ever since Tyrael had made the decision to shed his wings, forever altering his relationship with the Council, their conflict had remained unresolved and hung over them all like a dark cloud. "Do not let our unfinished business taint your thinking," Tyrael replied. "What happens here today has nothing to do with the anger you hold for my choices."

"Wisdom." Imperius's wings trembled with rage or mirth; Tyrael could

not decide. "Is that your advice for me from consulting the pools? I think not. A mortal who peers into the chalice may go blind, Tyrael. Perhaps you are afraid of what you might see."

"I fear nothing but your lust for conflict. The stone's influence is having an impact on the High Heavens, even now. Valor does not mean the execution of innocents."

"Nonsense," Imperius said. "The stone cannot harm us here. You see this as an opportunity for peace, but peace shall not exist until Sanctuary has been destroyed. Sacrifices must be made for the victory we seek. The Prime Evil nearly brought us to our knees, Tyrael! Never have the gates fallen before. There is no room for mercy—not anymore!"

He turned to enter the chamber, as if dismissing Tyrael from his sight. The archangel of Wisdom caught his armored arm. Power raced through Tyrael's flesh, nearly making him gasp. He gritted his teeth. "Do not do this, Imperius," he said. "There is also great goodness in them. Do not turn your back on the chance we have been given."

Balzael stepped forward again, but Imperius waved him away. He shook off Tyrael's touch as if disgusted by it, and the tone of pity his voice took on was far worse than his anger.

"The world of men has threatened our existence for too long," Imperius said. "It is a tool for the Hells to use against us. You have chosen to join their mortal ranks, and your judgment can no longer be trusted. You will learn, soon enough. The Council will act, whether you like it or not."



"Do not forget that the last time the fate of Sanctuary rested with the Council, the final vote was in favor of its existence," Auriel said. "In order to reopen such a debate, you must present evidence of a fundamental change that requires it."

"The evidence is clear," Imperius thundered from his perch above the Council floor. The archangel of Valor leaned forward as he gestured toward the Black Soulstone, his wings snapping in ribbons of light around his golden armor, his commanding voice filling the room as he turned to Itherael and Auriel. "It sits in mute judgment before us all."

"Do you not think the stone is safe here, among us?" Auriel asked.

"We have argued this many times. The greatest threat lies not with the stone but with the men who created it. We have failed to act for far too long. And while we argue endlessly through the ages, the Burning Hells continue to whisper their foul secrets in the ears of humans, influencing souls and using their world against us. The soulstone is yet another example of this. Forged by men, Auriel! If not for that, would the gates of

Heaven have fallen to the Prime Evil? Would we have lost so many of our brothers and sisters and come so close to the Arch shattering before us?"

"That is not so certain as you make it out to be," Auriel said. Tyrael watched her from his own seat above the floor. Her voice remained calm, in direct opposition to Imperius's impassioned speech, but he sensed an edge to it that he had last felt when they were together in these same chambers. "The Prime Evil may have simply found another way and perhaps then would have succeeded in destroying the Arch."

Imperius chuckled, but the sound held no warmth. "Hope has blinded you to the truth, my sister. Hell's servants have been broken, their leaders cast into the abyss. Now is the perfect time for us to act! We have the chance to land the decisive blow. Sanctuary has always been our greatest weakness. Destroy it, and we will swing the battle in our favor and end the Eternal Conflict—forever."

The Council chamber was silent. "There is some hope yet for humankind," Auriel said finally. "Remember that they are born of both angels and demons. There is as much capacity in them for light as for dark."

But the archangel of Hope's words lacked conviction, and her argument fell flat. Tyrael cleared his throat. The fact that Imperius had avoided his gaze for most of this meeting of the Council had not escaped him. "Do not forget the role the nephalem played in defeating the Prime Evil," he called out. "The Black Soulstone was forged in Sanctuary and was used against us, that is true. But the nephalem faced great evil and cast it down, when we, Heaven's guardians, were unable to act."

"And you declared a new golden age of angel and man, together for eternity," Imperius said, his words full of barely suppressed disgust. "Perhaps you should have consulted the Council before making such a promise."

The archangel's icy words were full of challenge, and the threat of violence once again hung over the chamber. Tyrael would not rise to it, not this time. "The nephalem have abilities we are only beginning to understand," he said. "If we destroy them now, we may lose our greatest weapon against such evil."

Imperius's voice grew louder. "In defiance of the law of the Heavens, you have interfered with the world of men again and again! And you have chosen to cast down your wings. This is just the latest example of your recklessness!" Imperius turned to the other members of the Council. "It is time to address an issue that concerns us all. Without Tyrael's meddling in the affairs of the mortal child Leah and her mother, the Prime Evil may not have found a home in the stone."

"That is not for us to know," Auriel said. "And Wisdom is not on trial here."

"Then perhaps Wisdom should offer his counsel." Ithrael, archangel of

Fate, had been largely silent for most of the session. In fact, he seldom spoke at all, and his words now surprised Tyrael. "Let us take up another, still unresolved issue, in spite of our series of debates: what to do with the Black Soulstone."

"Wisdom is no longer with us," Imperius said. "Malthael is gone, never to return."

"Be careful of your tone, my brother," Auriel said. "Do not insult Tyrael's decision to rejoin the Council; it does not become you."

"Then tell us what insights you have gained from Chalad'ar, Wisdom," Imperius said, his voice mocking once again. "Tell us what to do with the stone. The Council has been divided on this for too long. Or are the rumors among the angels correct, and you have yet to consult the chalice?"

Itherael and Auriel turned to Tyrael, waiting for him to offer a solution. He looked at the soulstone on its perch, imagined he saw a beat of blood-red light at its core. The darkness pervades this holy place, he thought. It creeps in unbidden and corrupts everything it touches.

Tyrael had come to his own decision. But he was unsure about how his advice would be taken by the others and hesitated for a moment too long.

Imperius turned away. "Malthael would never have been without an answer, yet this one is silent once again. I shall speak for him, then. We break the stone at the Hellforge."

A murmur from Auriel brought a fast response. "We should not risk destroying it," Itherael said. "It was forged by human magic; its destiny is a mystery to me. Even the Scroll of Fate cannot tell us what might result from such an attempt—"

"It must be hidden!" Tyrael said.

His words rang out, stronger than he might have intended. The others stopped, their attention returning to him. He cleared his throat again, hating how weak it made him sound. A throat made of flesh and blood was not a trustworthy vessel for such a speech. "Itherael is right," he said. "The Black Soulstone's power is unknown to us. The Horadric mage Kulle forged it using magic the nephalem alone possess. We cannot risk trying to destroy a thing like this; it may even release the Prime Evil upon us once more."

"Hide it where?" Auriel's tone had grown cautious, as if she knew what he might say. "We have already discussed shrouding it but could not come to an agreement. It cannot stay in the Council chambers forever."

Tyrael looked at his fellow archangels, sadness washing over him. He imagined that they viewed him with suspicion, perhaps thinly veiled hostility. Even Auriel's aura had changed, her wings pulsing softly with a light that mirrored the taint he had seen in the gardens among the trees.

He was not Justice or Wisdom, nor was he a man; he was a mortal angel, and this did not fit with the world they knew or with any other. His vision of peace with the land of men and a new life ending in eternal sleep was swiftly fading.

He had never meant for it to come to this.

"In Sanctuary," he said finally. "We must hide the stone in a place neither angel nor demon can reach."

"Are you mad?" Imperius roared, his voice crashing through the Council chamber like the crack of thunder. "You want to return it to the very place it was forged, where the Hells can use human souls against us? Darkness will find a way to rise once again, and the stone will become the weapon that destroys us all!"

"I have hidden soulstones in Sanctuary before," Tyrael said. "I have bound them with nephalem magic and kept the Prime Evils imprisoned—"

"And they have always found a way to corrupt humankind enough to escape," Auriel said. "I, too, cannot condone this, Tyrael. Imperius is right: Sanctuary must never be allowed to know the Black Soulstone still exists. It is much safer here, where we can provide protection by the Luminari."

"Can you not see what the stone is doing to you?" Tyrael's own voice grew louder. He stood from his seat and began to descend to the Council floor, steps infused with the energy of the Heavens materializing before him. "You sit here in judgment of me while all around you grows colder and darker each moment. It must be removed from here, or we risk the corruption of everything we hold most holy!"

Imperius pointed down at where Tyrael now stood in the center of the chamber. "You accuse us of growing lazy and blind in our duties to uphold the laws of the Heavens, while you, as archangel of Justice, chose to abandon your post willingly and assume mortal status?"

"Rage is a symptom. The stone feeds upon your light, drinks from your essence, and waits for you to grow weak enough for the very stars to fall —"

"Ridiculous. You do not think we are capable of sensing such danger?"

"Your pride blinds you to the truth. You cannot feel it as I can. You are not . . . mortal."

In a blaze of righteous fire, Imperius exploded from his throne, launching himself to the floor, where he landed in front of Tyrael and stood looming over him. "As well we are not," he said. "You have insulted the Council enough. We should have acted much sooner. I will not listen to your impudence any longer!"

Silence descended, the moment frozen in time. Not long ago, they had met on this very same spot and had come to blows.

"I will not raise a weapon against you, Imperius," Tyrael said. "Not this time."

He stepped around the archangel of Valor, who did not make a move to follow. Tyrael's heart beat faster as he walked toward the chamber exit.

"Where are you going?" Auriel called. "The rules of the Council forbid anyone to leave while we are in session."

Tyrael paused under the arch. "I can no longer sit with you as archangel

of Wisdom," he said. "You must respect my choice to shed my wings, or I will not remain. And if the stone stays here, Sanctuary is lost, and the High Heavens along with it. I fear you will choose a path that cannot be undone."



Outside the chamber, Balzael was waiting for Tyrael, weapon drawn. The strapping guard blocked his way, his armor infused with a golden glow, two others stepping up behind him. "You insult the Council," he said. "It is against the laws—"

"Get out of my way, Luminarei," Tyrael said. "Or do you mean to use that sword?"

"An angel without wings," said Balzael. "You are like a bird with clipped feathers that cannot fly. Perhaps we should put you in a cage."

Tyrael drew El'druin. How dare you insult me, the one who commanded you for so many years? he thought. The anger that he had held back rose up in him like a hungry flame.

"That would be the last thing you tried to do," he said.

Balzael raised his weapon in a fighting stance. Tyrael swung El'druin in a mighty arc, bringing all his rage through the blow, the sword clashing against the Luminarei's own and driving the angel backward and down to his knees. The anger felt like a cleansing fire, consuming him from within, and yet its very presence muted El'druin's power. Tyrael raised the weapon once more, his muscles quivering, but the Luminarei guard moved blindingly fast, rolling sideways and up again, his sword at the ready.

"Enough!" Imperius suddenly stood at the archway, his fiery wings raised and crackling like lightning around his armored visage.

"Sir," Balzael said. "He has chosen to leave the Council in session! He should be thrown into the Ring—"

"Let him go," Imperius said. "Look at his bones, his flesh. He is weakened by his mortal status and unable to fulfill his duties."

"You are wrong," Tyrael said. "I am stronger in spirit now than I have ever been, Imperius."

"Then why have you not yet turned to Chalad'ar? Are you afraid of what you might find within it? Or will it be too much for a mortal to bear?"

"My choices are my own and do not need to be explained."

"And once again, you have chosen to stand with Sanctuary," Imperius said. "If the Council votes to destroy it and eliminate the threat it holds for the Heavens once and for all, will you remain with the world of men and perish with them?"

Tyrael looked at Balzael, who had yet to lower his sword, and at Imperius, who stood under the arch as if blocking his return. He slid El'druin back into its sheath, his rage suddenly gone. Even I am being influenced by the foul, black pitch flowing across our realm, he thought. I must find a way to stop this.

"If that is the will of the Council, then so be it," he said.

Then Tyrael turned and left them standing there, aware that he had taken the next step down a road to an end he could not foresee.

Chapter Five



A Meeting of Thieves

Tyrael pushed away the memory of the Council's debate and looked at the ragged group of humans gathered around him. Their faces held varying degrees of skepticism and awe. Jacob had likely sensed the sword El'druin from a distance, and the necromancer Zayl had almost surely felt him coming long before he had made himself known. They would accept his presence and what he had to say, if for different reasons.

The others he was not so certain about. The monk had shown impressive strength and valor in battle against Belial's servants in Gea Kul, and his heart was pure. But the monk also followed his own path, and the possibilities that came with that were dangerous at best. His two companions from the Horadric cell at Gea Kul were valuable for their knowledge but had yet to access the hidden wells of power they possessed, and it was possible that they never would. The wizard was undeniably talented but equally headstrong and cynical; her scars were not physical and yet ran deeper than most and would provide a great challenge to overcome. And the barbarian was a woman without a tribe or a sense of place, possessing outward strength but little confidence.

A group of strangers and nothing more, Tyrael thought. He was reminded of a moment centuries ago, when he had faced another band of humans with a task that seemed nearly impossible. But this was the greater challenge. What they might become, should they choose to embrace what he was about to tell them, remained up to him.

"My apologies for the use of secrecy," he said. "You have all braved great dangers already. But it was necessary for reasons you will soon understand. Your meeting here in Tristram is not by chance."

"It was you," the wizard Shanar said. The words sounded like an accusation. "*You're behind the resonance!*"

"The man who appeared to me with a message from the gods," Mikulov said.

The others murmured softly in the firelight. "It has been written, many times, that the archangel Tyrael walked among men," the scholar, Cullen, said. "And we have heard as much from Leah more recently. But—forgive me—you're no angel."

"I have chosen to assume mortal form," Tyrael said. "There is much to explain. I knew your former leader, Horadrim, a man of great honor. His sacrifice for our cause shall not be forgotten."

"We traveled many miles to construct a monument here, only to

find one already stands, far more impressive than anything we might have done,” Thomas said. He turned back to the pyramid of white stone. The Horadric symbol at its apex appeared to glow in the moonlight. “This is your doing?”

Tyrael nodded. “As long as Sanctuary exists, it cannot be destroyed. It will stand in testament to Deckard’s courage—a shining light in the darkness.” He studied the faces turned toward him, waiting. They remained suspicious of one another and of him, and what he was about to tell them would likely make things far worse.

There was so much work to do and little time left.

“Let us build a fire to warm ourselves and keep away the dark,” he said. “And then I will tell you everything.”



They built a ring of stones and carried limbs from the dead trees that dotted the hillside. Thomas used a flint on the blackened, diseased wood, but the spark would not catch until Shanar’s magic set it ablaze. The flames that rose up risked calling attention to the gathering, but they were all glad to feel the heat, as the night had grown icy-cold and ever darker around them.

The group sat in clusters: Mikulov and the Horadrim together; Shanar, Jacob, and Gynvir giving Zayl plenty of space. The barbarian had not reslung her battle axe since the necromancer’s appearance.

Tyrael told them the story of the creation of Sanctuary millennia ago by the angel Inarius, who had left the High Heavens after tiring of the Eternal Conflict and who wanted a place hidden from both sides, where like-minded angels and demons could exist in harmony. Against all odds, Inarius fell in love with the demon Lilith, daughter of Mephisto. Their unholy union resulted in the firstborn nephalem—Rathma, Bul-Kathos, Esu, and others—an entirely new kind of powerful being that populated the world and began to multiply, in spite of attempts to destroy them. Over the centuries, their offspring would eventually evolve into humans, and although with each generation their abilities were diminished by the presence of the Worldstone, enough of their powers remained to give rise to the magic that existed now.

“With the Worldstone’s destruction twenty years ago,” Tyrael continued, “these nephalem abilities have begun to strengthen once again in those humans who are able to harness the secrets of the ancients. You need to understand this history, for it has a bearing on why we are here today.”

“The nephalem were courageous and pure,” Cullen said. “We have studied them in the texts.”

Tyrael nodded. Then he told them of the creation of the Black Soulstone by the Horadric mage Zoltun Kulle, an original member of the Horadrim and a man of great potential. Kulle’s fate was a constant reminder of the dangers they all faced. Power could corrupt, and the temptation toward darkness was strong, and Kulle’s relentless lust for immortality was his downfall. Although Kulle was eventually destroyed, his Black Soulstone, an object of immense and unknown power, was used centuries later in the transformation of the girl Leah into the Prime Evil and the assault on the gates of Heaven. The Crystal Arch had only been saved through the heroic actions of a true nephalem, a mortal blessed with abilities that came from this ancient birthright, one who could rise above even the strongest angel or demon.

The telling of this took a long time, and the flames began to draw low before Gynvir rose to stock them with new wood and Shanar breathed life into the fire. “This nephalem hero now stalks the lands somewhere east of Westmarch,” Tyrael said. “Searching for the witch Adria, who remains missing. I have come to Sanctuary and assembled you here because we must act on another urgent matter of crucial importance, and there is little time left. The Black Soulstone is once again endangering all we hold dear, but it cannot be safely destroyed. There is only one solution: it must be hidden away. I have chosen you—as I did centuries ago in assembling the Horadrim to hunt down and capture the Prime Evils—to assist me in this vital mission.”

It was the scholar who finally spoke again. The man reminded Tyrael of Deckard Cain; although the two were physically very different, they shared a natural curiosity and a quick mind.

“A letter from Leah was delivered by a courier to our temple in Gea Kul some time ago,” Cullen said. “She wrote about finding a stranger with a broken sword in Tristram. She described Deckard’s death at the cultists’ hands and the discovery of the soulstone. And she wrote about finding her mother still alive and asked for our help in deciphering the stone’s true nature.”

“So you know that I speak the truth in this.”

“Adria was convinced that it held the key to destroying the seven Evils from the Hells. I scoured our library for anything I could find on the stone and sent my notes to Caldeum, but they were returned to me. The messenger told me that Leah could not be found. Now you tell us that she . . .”

Cullen stopped for a moment, carefully removing his spectacles. He slipped a cloth from his satchel and wiped his moist eyes, then returned the spectacles to the bridge of his nose. “All those years

wondering about her mother,” he said, his voice rough with emotion. “She deserved a better fate.”

“She fought against the possession of her soul,” Tyrael said. “The fall of the gates was not her doing. The Prime Evil had already overtaken her. I believe her suffering was brief.”

Cullen nodded, glancing at his two companions, Thomas and the monk. “Where is the stone now?” he asked.

“It sits in the Heavens, protected by the Luminarei, the Defenders of the Arch.”

“A holy guard? Why not leave it in place?”

“The stone is too dangerous. Already it has begun to corrupt the Heavens, and I fear that soon it will be too late to act. But the Angiris Council will never voluntarily choose to hand it over to humans for safekeeping.”

“Then what are you suggesting we do?”

Tyrael met the scholar’s gaze. “We must invade the Heavens and steal it.”

The group erupted into shocked disbelief. “Invade the Heavens?” Cullen said. “From my studies, humans have never set foot there, at least before this battle you describe with the Prime Evil. Mortals cannot comprehend the beauty, the overwhelming scope of them. The dangers inherent in such an attempt . . .”

You are correct, Tyrael thought. *Even I might lose my life in this pursuit*. The thought came unbidden and surprised him with its strength. His hand crept toward an inner pocket of his robes as if of its own accord, then dropped. *Death comes to call on all mortals, sooner or later*.

“Apologies for bringing a little skepticism to the party,” Shanar said. She had risen from her seat, a flush reddening her pretty face. “I followed the Song of the Arch because I didn’t have much of a choice; it was the will of the Heavens, you know? The last time this happened, I was trapped in a cave with a sword for company for who knows how long, until this one”—she gestured at Jacob—“finally got around to showing up. Now we come all the way to this forsaken place, and you tell us we’re needed for a *suicide* mission?”

The wizard’s words hung in the air while the others remained silent. Tyrael could see them exchange glances and quickly look away, as if nobody wanted to speak next. Their faces reflected distrust, uncertainty, even fear.

“I have chosen you all for a reason,” Tyrael said. “Each and every one of you will play an important role in saving this world and the one beyond it. Zayl, you fought a powerful demon not long ago and prevailed. Mikulov, Thomas, and Cullen, you stood with Deckard Cain on the battlefield of Gea Kul against a dark sorcerer in league with

Belial and defeated an army of the undead. Shanar, Jacob, and Gynvir, you stared into the face of the rage plague and did not blink.” His voice rose. “You will confront terrible dangers and what will appear to be impossible odds. But you have undiscovered wells of strength, awarded by your very birth; you have the blood of angels and demons running in your veins, a mix of light and dark, which makes you able to wield more power than you can possibly understand.”

“Our strengths,” Jacob repeated slowly, as if trying to come to an understanding. He had remained mostly silent until now. “We all fight with some degree of skill, but what you’re talking about requires much more than that. It’ll take an army.”

Tyrael withdrew his sword from its sheath, holding the shining edge to the light of the fire. “When I was lost to the Worldstone, you wielded El’druin as the avatar of Justice,” he said. “That was no accident, Jacob. You have much you can teach the others here.”

“The power I wielded as an instrument of Justice was given to me through the sword,” Jacob said. “El’druin has returned to its master. I no longer possess it.”

“What’s happening now?” The voice was muffled, slightly irked, as if it came from a man who had been sitting in a cramped position too long. “Can’t see a damned thing in here!”

Tyrael saw Zayl’s hand pat the bulging pouch on his belt. “A moment, Humbart,” the necromancer said quietly. Then he looked at Tyrael. “We have come, as we have been called,” he said. “And I, at least, am willing to accept much of what you say. But do you have a plan to accomplish this thievery?”

Tyrael hesitated. He had spent a long time poring through Deckard Cain’s ancient texts in the library he had left behind, searching for answers. He had to find the perfect location to hide the stone, somewhere that would be safe from those who would seek its power.

Finally, he believed he had found it, buried in obscure references within copies of the *Books of Kalan* from Cain’s collection. “An ancient stronghold lies hidden somewhere in the lands to the west, a city of great power built by nephalem—empty now but shielded from angel and demon. I have come to believe that this is the only safe place to hide the stone.”

“And exactly how are we supposed to find this place?” Shanar said, her skepticism still showing in her face.

“Deckard Cain believed that Rakkis and his sons had discovered it many years ago and that it lies somewhere close to Bramwell or Westmarch. Cain had found a passage in a Zakarum holy text about the key to its location, some sort of map. In Cain’s own hand, he had written about the possibility of other documents kept by Rakkis that might reveal far more about the long-abandoned city. But they had

been hidden away somewhere.”

“There are several lesser-known texts that refer to such a place,” Cullen said. “A scholar named Hael wrote about it two hundred years ago, but he determined that it was most likely symbolic rather than an actual location.”

“I was told in a vision we should find the blacksmith in Bramwell, a man named Borad, and he would have the key that we seek,” Zayl said. “I can only assume it refers to these documents and this stronghold—”

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” the muffled voice from Zayl’s pouch said. “But if you don’t pay attention, this quest of yours is going to be the shortest one in recent memory. Someone—*something*—approaches in a mighty big hurry, and I don’t think it’s friendly! Can you feel it, Zayl? Hello, mate! You fallen asleep up there?”

The others stared at the pouch. The necromancer shook his head. He was looking over the flickering fire, eyes on the distant, blackened shapes of stunted trees that loomed in the darkness. “Humbart is right,” he said quietly. “Something is watching us. There is . . . an unnatural presence nearby. Stay still and listen.”

The group fell silent. Small sounds of movement came from all sides: shuffling, stealthy steps, snuffling, pebbles rolling in the night. From beyond that came the sound of something larger shambling up the hill toward them.

Shanar stood in one quick move and threw her arms toward the black sky. Fire erupted from her fingers, arching through the air over their heads, bursting above them in streaks of pinks, purples, and blues.

Light illuminated the tombstones in stark relief and exposed a pack of doglike beasts descending upon the group. They came from everywhere at once, seemingly out of nowhere, creeping with their horned, eyeless faces low to the ground, their haunches quivering, and following them over the hill marched a dozen huge creatures with muscled shoulders and bared teeth, dragging spiked mauls behind them.

Chapter Six



Escape to New Tristram

“Demonspawn,” Gynvir said, gritting her teeth and spitting out the word. “Where did they come from?”

“Remnants of evil still walk these lands,” Tyrael said. “They hunt in packs and must have been drawn by the fire.”

“No kidding,” muttered Shanar. “I don’t think it’s a welcoming party.”

The group put the dying flames at their backs, closing ranks in a circle with their weapons out. Jacob slid his short sword from its sheath and looked around at the others. A stand here might work for a while if they trusted one another with their lives, but that was clearly not the case. One weak fighter could let a hellion through to wreak havoc. There was a gap between Gynvir and Zayl large enough for a beast to get through with a leap, but the barbarian refused to move any closer and kept glancing at the smaller man as if waiting for him to pounce on her. Jacob motioned to Shanar to get between them. She gave him a quick look but complied.

The dark berserkers kept advancing. He had faced these before, in the Dreadlands. They were slow but would not go down easily—the size of two men, their bare chests rippling, iron marks clamped across their hideous, twisted features, exposing a line of sharp teeth and bloody gums. One of them raised its gigantic maul in both fists and smashed it with a vicious overhead swing into the rocky soil. The impact caused the ground to shake and sent the hellions into a slavering frenzy, their snarls rising up as the closest crept forward.

And me with nothing but this small sword. Jacob stole a glance at Tyrael, who held El’druin. He remembered the feel of the magnificent weapon in his own hands, and a ghostlike thrill ran through him. With the Sword of Justice, he had stood with the light and fulfilled every promise he had made to his long-dead father, a man of right and wrong, principled and fair, who had administered the laws of Staalbreak with a steady hand before the rage plague turned him into a monster. That was the man Jacob chose to remember, not the one who had executed Jacob’s mother and nearly brought the town to its knees.

Not the one who had tried to kill his son, not the one Jacob had murdered with his own hand.

“Look for their masters,” Zayl said in a low voice that carried through the group. “Berserkers do not act alone. There are cultists close by, pulling their strings.”

And then the beasts were upon them, and there was little time left to think.

The first hellion's leap carried it within striking distance of El'druin. Tyrael swung the sword, and the blade sang through the air, slicing the creature neatly in half. Two bloody, writhing pieces tumbled to the ground, teeth still snapping, innards spilling to wet the dust. Another came, and Tyrael struck a second mighty blow, cleaving the creature's head from its shoulders.

Cullen let out a low cry, the small man stumbling backward, a hellion's snarling maw impaled upon his sword. Thomas had sliced another's belly open, exposing rib bones and gristle as it fell. But the two men, occupied by their attackers, had left their spot vulnerable.

Where is the monk? Jacob could not find him anywhere. Had he already slipped away into the night, leaving them behind to fight?

Then he saw him, like a flash of holy light.

Mikulov worked beyond the fire among the creatures that slunk everywhere. He moved with blinding speed, leaping across the backs of the hellions and punching downward with a blade that seemed to be an extension of his hand, severing their spines before pivoting and stabbing again at another. His actions were effortless, his power breathtaking.

"Look out!" Shanar's warning made Jacob turn just in time. One of the largest of the dog beasts had advanced, creeping low and closing on his feet. He thrust his sword downward as the thing lunged at him, driving the blade into the back of its neck, just past its bony skull. It howled and shook itself so hard Jacob lost his grip on the handle, and the creature went stumbling off sideways, with the sword sticking up like a quivering quill, before it collapsed to the dirt.

Aching to once again feel the power of El'druin in his hands, he glanced at Shanar, who was muttering words he could not make out over the din. A burst of purple arcane energy shot from her fingers like a bolt of lightning, striking the two hellions closest to her with a sizzling crack and opening up a temporary hole in their ranks. She threw another bolt that streaked through the air and hit a berserker in the chest.

The creature howled with rage and stumbled, going to its knees. It dropped its maul and clawed at the smoking crater deep in its flesh.

Jacob yanked his sword free from the dead hellion. Someone would have to create a path to escape. He looked over toward Deckard Cain's gravestone, gleaming white like a beacon. Only the wounded berserker stood between them and the stone, and beyond that was an open path back the way they had come.

A bit of his old swagger returned, and with it came the desire to impress Shanar.

“Don’t!” Shanar had seemed to guess his intent, but he took no heed and leaped into the gap she had cleared. In three quick steps, he was at the wounded berserker’s side. He swung his sword with all his strength at the thing’s head. But the beast surprised him, raising its arm to ward off the blow, and the sword’s edge did nothing more than gouge a shallow line in its thick blue skin.

A sinking feeling settled in Jacob’s stomach as he swung the sword again and caught nothing but air. The berserker struggled to its feet, roaring with rage. He glanced to his left and saw another heading toward him, maul raised, snarl on its bloody lips.

He was trapped, cut off from the others, with two monstrous creatures moving in for the kill.

Just as the second one got close enough to bash Jacob’s skull to pulp, it suddenly stumbled, before halting in its tracks, and then shuddered, weaving on its feet. Its huge muscled arms went slack as its head slumped, and it fell forward into the dirt.

Sticking out of the creature’s back was a battle axe.

With a low grunt, Gynvir reached down, placed her foot on its spine, and yanked the axe loose. “Move,” she said, and Jacob barely had time to duck before she swung the axe in a whistling arc that caught the other berserker under the chin. The blade bit deep into the diseased flesh, exposing muscle and bone as the creature’s head flopped sideways and tore free, leaving a stump that fountained black blood before the headless torso fell.

“Thanks,” Jacob said. The barbarian gave him a small smile before turning again and cleaving a hellion in two, her magnificently muscled back glistening in the dying light from overhead.



The creatures were relentless. Jacob battled on, working just to stay alive. Tyrael killed four berserkers and a dozen hellions with El’druin. Jacob killed two more hellions and kept himself from being bitten when the last one snapped at his leg in its death throes; he knew well enough what the thing’s diseased saliva would do to a wound.

Finally, he saw something beyond the slope and managed to fight his way through for a better look.

Below them, he saw the cultists.

They stood in a rough circle around a pattern of glowing runes drawn in the dirt, dark robes flowing in the breeze as they raised their chanting voices to the sky. Once again, Jacob thought he saw something else flitting at the edges of the circle, something huge and

black with wings, but it was soon gone.

He turned back just in time to see the monk burst through the ranks of the chanting figures as if appearing out of thin air.

His blade sliced through flesh; his fists flew in a blur as he spun and laid waste to those who remained. In moments, the circle was broken, bodies lying motionless at Mikulov's feet.

Beyond him, the ground was clear of hellions and berserkers. The monk looked up the slope at Jacob and nodded. "This way," he said. "Quickly!"

Jacob surveyed the graveyard, his heart sinking. Thomas and Cullen fought together back-to-back, managing to keep the hellions off them. But the others were scattered. Shanar and Gynvir had become isolated from Tyrael, and the necromancer stood alone near the far end of the flat tableau.

Without the cultists' dark magic guiding them, the berserkers became confused, lumbering back and forth. Zayl raised his hands, and a crackle of energy reduced the creatures' movements to a crawl. Jacob shouted at the others, motioning them his way as he stood under Cain's monument.

Thomas and Cullen were already down the slope and at the monk's side, and Zayl was right behind them by the time Gynvir made it to the monument. Shanar was the last to reach him, and the berserkers had begun to recover from the necromancer's spell, turning their way.

"Go," she said. "I'll be right behind you. Just want to slow them down a little more."

The ground began to shiver and soften gently under Jacob's feet. Moisture welled up from formerly dry soil, sucking at his boots before freezing into ice crystals. The air temperature dropped quickly, until Jacob could see his breath puffing in white clouds before his face. Snowflakes started to fall around him.

Shanar glanced at him, her face twisted with concentration. "Go!" she said again. "I can't hold it much longer!"

As he slipped and slid down the hill, Jacob looked back to see the first of the berserkers reach her position. A wave of panic washed over him before a giant ice shard crashed down like a thunderclap, smashing into the creature and driving it to the ground. Shanar danced backward as more columns of ice began to fall upon the graveyard, and the shrieks of rage and pain from the beasts grew louder. None followed as she came quickly after him to where the others waited to make their escape.

Chapter Seven



The Slaughtered Calf

They were in trouble.

Tyrael led the group across the desolate landscape under the faint moonlight as quickly as he dared. Nobody spoke as they navigated the tricky terrain, everyone watching carefully to keep from breaking an ankle on the pitted, rocky ground.

What worried him wasn't their escape route or how far they had to travel to reach safe lodging. He could already see New Tristram's glimmer of lanterns in the distance, and Shanar's ice storm had wreaked havoc among the creatures that remained in the graveyard; the humans had not been pursued.

No, what worried him was the way the group had reacted to its first test.

Although he had been counting on the pack of rogue demons to appear sooner or later—remnants of the Lesser Evils' demon army still roamed Sanctuary, and the Tristram Cathedral was a prime location for them—he had been surprised by their numbers and ferocity. He had expected to have more time and less of a fight.

That number of berserkers and cultists, acting with some coordination, was unusual.

Even so, he had hoped for a better response under pressure. There had been moments of bravery: Gynvir had likely saved Jacob from an ugly death at the hands of two berserkers, and Mikulov had single-handedly kept the tide from turning against the others. But the monk had also left the circle and acted alone, and the rest had fought with little coordination. Cullen barely held his own against the hellions. Only blind luck had kept them all alive.

They would have to do a lot better than that to have a chance at succeeding in their mission, or death would be swift indeed.

You put their lives in danger tonight for a simple test. And they failed.

As he led them down the final gentle slope toward town, Tyrael wondered whether it had been worth the risk.



New Tristram had sprung up as a trade town dealing with the treasure seekers who came to loot the ruins of the old cathedral and whatever else remained of Tristram, and as such, it had grown organically,

without a great deal of planning. They reached a haphazard collection of huts and wagons first, some glowing with candlelight against the thick darkness, others looking abandoned, but soon these gave way to sturdier buildings made of wood and stone, and rocky paths became winding, roughly cobbled streets that stank of mule dung and smoke.

The Slaughtered Calf Inn was one of the largest structures, and there was life within it indeed. Lanterns hung from posts, illuminating the rough-hewn wooden sign outside the door, and windows shone with bright yellow light as raised voices and laughter came from inside.

The group paused in the shadows as the sounds of the crowd followed a bearded man stumbling out the door, muttering to himself as he continued on his way down the street, occasionally tripping over the rough stones and cursing as he went. Tyrael had last been here with Leah and Deckard Cain as a new mortal without a memory, searching for answers to his own past. Looking at the inn now was like staring at a ghost, and he felt a momentary intense pang for his lost friends. As much as anyone else, he had been responsible for their deaths. He had not acted quickly enough, had not been able to protect Cain from Maghda the witch and her minions, had not been able to stop Leah's slow corruption by Diablo, his ancient enemy. He had not foreseen the true role of the Black Soulstone and Leah's coming transformation into the Prime Evil.

She was an innocent. The pang of loss sharpened, digging its claws into him. The strength of his emotions surprised him, and Tyrael was once again reminded of his mortal shell and all that came along with it. He felt sorrow differently now, and loneliness, a melancholy that left a deep, hollow void within him.

How many human lives had been lost defending the High Heavens? What sort of toll might be expected now, for his new mission to succeed?

Tyrael thought of the object nestled against his chest, safely hidden under his robes. He thirsted for what lay within it; all his sorrows would be lost, at least for a while, in such swirling depths . . .

"I don't like the look of this place." Jacob had come up to his side and spoke in a low voice as the others gathered behind. "But we ought to get inside."

Tyrael turned to the others. Gynvir had a nasty scratch on her thigh, and Thomas was nursing a sore ankle. "The healer Malachi is always here, and he can attend to any wounds you might have received," he said. "Cullen, you will draw the least scrutiny. Go secure lodging for us, and find a way to get us in undetected. We sleep here tonight."



The Slaughtered Calf was doing good business these days as a stop on one of the trade routes between Caldeum and Westmarch. Tonight there was something else going on, and it didn't take Cullen long to get the gist of it. A party in support of Bron the barkeep, the apparent owner of the establishment, for mayor of New Tristram was in full swing, and there were enough dealers and thieves drinking with Bron and the other locals that they paid the short, balding scholar little attention as he requested several rooms for himself and his traveling party, which he described as including a high nobleman from Caldeum who would prefer to remain anonymous. Cullen slipped Bron extra payment for his troubles, and the barkeep directed him to a back entrance, out of sight of prying eyes.

"Mayor's a job for suckers and fools," Bron muttered, his eyes bleary with drink. "Holus ran straight for the hills at the first sign of trouble, left us high and dry, he did. Be damned if you'll catch me doing his duty, but I'll accept their mead while it runs freely."

Cullen nodded as if he sympathized, and Bron went tottering off to bend another man's ear. Cullen led the rest of the group in through the back door, as Bron had suggested. A barmaid brought them mutton leg and bread from the kitchen, and Malachi came to treat Gynvir's scratch and Thomas's ankle, but neither one was suffering much pain, and they required little but salve and cloth wraps to hold the swelling down.

Cullen paid the healer generously to keep his silence, but Tyrael knew that it wouldn't last long. Malachi had been drinking, too, his cheeks rosy and his eyes glazed. Soon there would be stories around town of the strange group of spellcasters and warriors who looked as if they had just come from battle and had taken up residence at the inn, and more questions would be asked. They would not be able to stay long, but they needed rest to gather their strength for the journey ahead.

Still, as they finished eating and settled into their two rooms, the members of the group were unable to sleep and gathered to talk among themselves as Tyrael slipped out the back again for a quiet check of the streets outside the Slaughtered Calf.

The streets were silent and abandoned, with no signs of danger. Tyrael did not remain, afraid of what he might do if faced with the emptiness of the night beyond the glow of the lanterns. When he returned through the back door, the sounds of a lyre called to him from the tavern. He paused, looking in at the group of revelers

gathered there, remembering once again when he had come here with Deckard and Leah. Then the tavern had been mostly cleared out to make room for the wounded, but long tables now occupied its center, most of them full of rough-looking locals.

The large, open space was filled with flickering candlelight, and thick beams ran across the ceiling and walls, the wide, worn floorboards faded to a dull, weathered gray. Above him was the head of a horned beast, mounted to a wooden slab, its teeth exposed in an eternal snarl. For a moment, he was reminded of Imperius's trophies which adorned his chambers in the Halls of Valor. Would he ever return to the Heavens again in peace, or would his last glimpse be part of a battle he could not win?

The lyre player was at the far end of the room, strumming the tired strings with methodical determination. A man was busy tending the bar, pouring mead from a barrel for patrons sitting on stools, while Bron continued to accept offers of free drinks from the crowd.

A moment later, Tyrael spotted a familiar hooded figure sitting alone at a small table near a bookcase to his right, a mug of mead in his hands. Several people glanced at him, then quickly away. In New Tristram, it was not good to pay too much attention to strangers, particularly those who were armed.

"You should remain out of sight," Tyrael said. "We are not here to call attention to ourselves."

Jacob took a long drag from his mug and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Nobody pays me much mind," he said. "I've learned how to blend in. You, on the other hand, with El'druin at your side . . ." He did not finish the sentence but finally looked up. His eyes were unfocused, but Tyrael saw pain there, along with something else. Perhaps anger, perhaps simply regret.

"May I sit?"

Jacob waved at the empty chair across from him. "Do what you will."

"You fought bravely tonight," Tyrael said.

"I barely kept myself from getting killed. Gynvir saved me from those two berserkers, or I might have met my end before we began." Jacob downed the last of his mead and gestured for more to a barmaid who was hurrying by with a tray. "Tell me, are you serious about invading the Heavens with this ragged band of thieves?"

Tyrael looked to be sure nobody was paying them any attention. "I have tried to appeal to the Council, but they will not listen," he said. "It is the only way."

"The rest of our little group is bad enough. A sorry bunch of lost souls. But I don't understand why you've chosen me. I can't possibly offer you much, not anymore."

“Such self-pity does not suit you, Jacob of Staalbreak. You have a crucial role to play,” Tyrael said. He wanted to speak plainly, although he wasn’t sure Jacob would listen. “You must find your inner strength again and show the others the way if we are to have any chance at success.” *You are also the kind of leader this group desperately needs*, he thought. But Tyrael was blind in matters of the heart, and Jacob was far from ready to lead anyone. Jacob clearly still held strong feelings for the wizard Shanar. That, coupled with his frustration over the loss of El’druin, made him a liability. One that Tyrael could not afford.

“You and the wizard have a history,” he said. “I have no doubt it is a complicated one. Do not let that get in the way of what needs to be done.”

Jacob looked at Tyrael as if finally seeing him. “We were together for a long time, fighting against injustice in this world,” he said. “Ivan, too, although he came and went as it suited him. But when I lost El’druin, I no longer interested her. She left me.” He shrugged. “She is still as beautiful as the moment I first saw her. How is that possible, while I’ve aged twenty years?”

Tyrael studied the slump of Jacob’s shoulders. “Do you think she was after the sword?”

“Not the sword . . .” He waved again. “What it did for me.”

“And Gynvir? What did she want?”

Jacob paused for so long Tyrael wondered if he had forgotten the question. The barmaid brought him another mug of mead, and he took a large swallow. “She was a loyal friend,” he said. “Perhaps there were some feelings that complicated things. It ended badly for all of us. She left, too. And now, to have her saving my skin when I couldn’t even handle a single wounded berserker . . .”

He did not have to finish the thought. Jacob had looked weak and helpless at the moment when he had most wanted to impress his old companions. But this was not about impressing anyone; it was about a duty to fight for the side of the righteous, even if it meant acting against the Heavens themselves.

“Your power was never about El’druin, Jacob,” Tyrael said. “You are a descendant of Inarius and Lilith, and you administer justice with or without it.”

Jacob shook his head. “The sword was *everything*. You don’t understand what it’s like . . . to go from a man to a *god*,” he said, the intensity in his voice rising. “And then back again!”

“Perhaps I do.”

Jacob sat back, stared at him for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice was calmer. “You chose to become like us, and yet you remain a part of the Heavens. Still an archangel but with a mortal

soul?"

"After the Prime Evil's fall, Justice was no longer needed. I chose to sit as Wisdom, a mortal among the Angiris Council. But I could not convince them of the danger they faced, nor could I stand with them as they debated the destruction of humanity."

Jacob stared off into space and said nothing for a while. "How could you give that up?" he said finally. "The power of it, the beauty, eternal life . . ."

A chill settled over Tyrael. *Mankind struggles toward the stars, he thought, while we, in our gilded rooms, sit in judgment over them and in our hearts wish we could switch places and experience the mortal flesh, the thump of blood in our veins.* Or perhaps not; perhaps he was the only one. Now he belonged in neither world, a mortal without a home.

Instead of answering, he gestured at the mug of mead. "Do you think this is what your father would have wanted, Jacob? Drowning your sorrows in drink, while the innocent are slaughtered?"

"What do you know about my father?"

"I know he was a good man, before the rage plague took him. I know he taught you the meaning of right and wrong, the importance of justice handed out without the taint of revenge and with good judgment. These are the things you must remember, not what happened after he was lost."

"He murdered my mother for a crime she didn't commit," Jacob said. "And I killed him. I had to do it, or he would have done the same to me. Rage plague or not, where is the justice in that?"

A surge of laughter came from the bar as Bron stumbled, stone-faced drunk, and had to be propped back on his stool. As the candlelight flickered across Jacob's tortured face, Tyrael glanced around the room and found no eyes upon them. He unbuckled the sheath that held El'druin and set it with the sword on the table between them.

Jacob stared at the sheath and the sword. For a moment, Tyrael thought he might reach for them, but the man slowly shook his head.

"You're wrong," he said. "I was never the avatar of Justice. I was simply a placeholder, keeping the sword sharp and ready for your return." Abruptly, he stood. "I need to get some sleep," he said. "The morning will be here soon enough."

Tyrael returned El'druin to its place at his side. Jacob took a step toward the back door and stopped.

"You never asked whether we would accept this mission," he said. "Some of us are going to die. Maybe the whole group. Do you really think it's worth the risk?"

It was the same question Tyrael had been asking himself lately. *If the stone is really capable of bringing down the Heavens, are a few lives in*

exchange for many a good trade? Many centuries earlier, during the Hunt for the Three, he had believed that all life was sacred, and it was not up to him to make such a choice. But if true victory against the darkness could be achieved, would that justify the attempt?

Those who lost their lives might not think so.

Jacob nodded, as if he had received an answer. “If I learned anything tonight, it’s that I’m no longer suited for such a thing,” he said.

And then he turned and left the room, leaving Tyrael to sit alone, the echo of his words still hanging in the air.



Tyrael sat at the table in the Slaughtered Calf for some time. The barmaid came at one point and took Jacob’s mug away, asking him whether he’d like something to eat or drink; Tyrael declined. *Another mortal weakness.* He had taken little of the mutton and bread upstairs, and although his stomach growled and churned within him, he would not give in to it now.

He was not used to questioning himself, but the mistakes he had made would not be denied. Finally, he brought them into the light and examined them, one by one. He thought of Imperius and his thundering rage at what he viewed as his brother’s betrayal, his insistence on the destruction of Sanctuary as the only path. Had Tyrael done the right thing, leaving the Heavens and forsaking his seat on the Angiris Council? Had he chosen well in bringing this group together? If they could not find a way to work as one, they were all doomed before the quest even began. They would be slaughtered like pigs by the Luminarei.

He needed wise advice.

Use the chalice.

As Wisdom, he should rely on it for insight. Malthael had done so frequently and brought what he gleaned to the Council during matters of utmost importance and debate. But Malthael was long gone. Tyrael touched the object hidden in his robes, felt its weight, the tingle on his fingers. The chalice called to him, and he both wanted it and feared what it might reveal. He had peered into its depths once before, and what it had shown him was exhilarating and terrifying. It had also shown him other things—things that he would have preferred never to see.

The chill of death crept over him once again. Before he had become mortal, he possessed a rare ability to remain impartial, calm under

pressure, weighing odds and acting on his sense of justice. Now his emotions overwhelmed him—fear and desire, rage and sorrow and hopelessness. He was weakened by them, no matter how hard he tried to resist.

Was it a sign of his own limitations that he desperately wanted to consult the chalice in order to understand which path to take?

What that meant for his mission and for the future of Sanctuary and the Heavens, he could not know.

Chapter Eight



The Chalice, Weeks Earlier

The sound of his brother's laughter brought him out of his dream.

Tyrael had been standing on a slab of bare rock thrust high above land. All around him was a flat ocean of white mist, an emptiness that would never end. He was without his weapon, unable to gather enough strength to form a fist. He was nothing but a vague outline of energy that struggled to maintain its shape, like a shadow on the ground. Dimly, he knew this was a memory of his reconstitution after the Worldstone's destruction had torn his essence apart, and yet the dream was different from what he remembered, for in this instance, he was not alone.

Above him, he could see the members of the Angiris Council on their thrones. They sat impassively in judgment of him as he worked furiously to re-form himself, but he could not seem to become whole again. Auriel's aura pulsed softly, as if in shame; he began to notice streaks of gray leaking through her normally warm, soothing glow. Itherael was motionless, pity over Tyrael's fate seeming to emanate from him.

"He is mortal now," one of them said. "He cannot return. He is bound by the blood."

Imperius pointed with the Spear of Valor, and a bright, searing band of light pinned Tyrael in place. Suddenly, he was no longer a loose whirlwind of energy; he was made of flesh and bone. "You have forsaken us," Imperius said. "You are nothing but a trained animal, and you will be treated as such."

"Let us show him his sins," Auriel said. Her voice was tinged with sadness and regret.

A brilliant flash turned everything white. When Tyrael's sight returned, Deckard Cain was seated with the Council, and Leah stood behind him, her face a mask of blood. She screamed as horns sprouted from her forehead. Her flesh crackled and split.

Imperius's laughter stayed with him long after he shook himself awake.



Tyrael sat in Wisdom's domain as the dream clung to him like a spider's web. At the Fount of Wisdom in the center of the vast main courtyard, exhaustion and despair had overwhelmed him at long last. Somehow, he had fallen asleep, and after the unsettling vision, he felt like an intruder.

I must leave this place, he thought. And yet he could not.

An atrium led to soaring, polished stone halls and a magnificent courtyard open to the sky. But it was all empty and dead and icy-cold, and the endless halls and anterooms had an air of neglect. Everything here was silent, the music that permeated the Heavens conspicuously absent. There was no radiant glow, no golden light; the realm had faded to gray. Even his footsteps made no sound.

He should have felt at home. Beautiful streams and waterfalls used to fill pools and tumble through rock-strewn paths, but they were dry now, and the majestic Fount was dead and still. When Malthael's disappearance had gone on longer than any had before, the Council had sent his angels to search for him. A few returned empty-handed, but most simply vanished. No one knew what had happened to the rest, and there were no others to take their place. The angelic forces Tyrael used to command as Justice were being tasked by Imperius to track down rogue packs of demons after the Prime Evil's fall, and he had yet to recruit his own angels as Wisdom.

Now, perhaps, he never would. He feared the changes to the realm of Wisdom could not be undone.

Maybe Imperius was correct after all; maybe he was afraid to embrace his new role within the Council. But Tyrael had come for one thing tonight. The chalice was here, waiting for him. He must consult it to help him truly understand the soulstone's influence on the Heavens and whether the path he was considering was the right one.

Tyrael stood, his knees popping, sore from remaining in one position for so long on the hard stone courtyard. Chalad'ar was set into the side of the Fount itself, perfectly fitted into a carved depression like a key into a lock. The chalice had four handles and was adorned with etchings depicting water flowing from one place to the next in a cascading pattern that appeared chaotic at first. But it was not. It was the same with the pools and streams within the realm itself; walking along the paths might lead a visitor to feel lost within a maze, but if everything was viewed from far above, the pattern would become instantly clear. Wisdom was a web connecting all things, a sum total of all experiences and emotions of sentient beings at any moment in time, and the trick was in seeing those connections and drawing conclusions from them, understanding the balance between motion and stillness, light and dark.

Malthael would refill the chalice at the endless pools and stare into it for years on end, gaining insights into the totality of existence that others, even the other members of the Angiris Council, could not grasp.

To peer into the chalice would prove that he did not fear it, Tyrael thought, and perhaps it would also offer the answers he so desperately sought.

He pressed gently against Chalad'ar, his fingers tingling, until it released itself to him. The chalice's power enveloped him, walked up and down his spine. To control this power would take all the strength he possessed. As he

peered into its depths, the idea that he could lose himself forever within the endless, ancient pools made him wonder whether he had made the right choice after all.

The bottom of the chalice was not empty. A thin film of light moved within it, swirling hypnotically in a rainbow of colors like oil on the surface of a pool.

At first, it seemed to hold nothing else. But then a charge swept up from the depths beneath Tyrael's feet. He heard a gurgle and bubble of liquid, as if a long-dead spring had come to life. His entire body turned to ice as the world around him grew black and Wisdom's domain disappeared; he was aware of a void that he peered into like a world beyond the stars, where the blackness was deeper than the darkest night.

Within the darkness, he saw sparks dance like fireflies, shooting across the liquid surface as it expanded rapidly, growing larger and larger. The rim of the chalice receded and then disappeared into the distance, and Tyrael fell into the depths, tumbling through this world into another, toward oblivion.

As he neared the surface, he realized that it was an intricate web created from endless strands of light, all of them rippling as pulses ran back and forth along their lengths, moving from one to the other at incredible speed. Dimly, some part of him realized that his physical body was still standing motionless somewhere far above him and that his consciousness had broken free. But he could not stop his descent, and as he struck the first strands, he instinctively threw his arms up as if to ward them off, bracing for impact.

It never came.

When Tyrael regained his senses, he had come to a halt within the web itself. He was seeing without eyes, sensing what now enveloped him with sizzling energy. Strands of bright light ran everywhere, passing through him in a way that made him shiver; the strands were not warm, as sunlight would be, but bitter cold.

A strange feeling fell over him, a sense of endless euphoria mixed with dread. In a flash, everything became clear; all the threads that had appeared to lead nowhere had been brought together as one. The light was woven in a brilliant pattern that he could suddenly grasp with little effort, and he could see the connections of all angels and demons within it.

The other archangels were assembling against him even now.

He saw their fear. His decision to become mortal overwhelmed them. It was a choice they could not understand, and they sought to banish it from their minds. Just as he had feared, the Black Soulstone had begun to corrupt the light that sustained them, twisting it into something dark and distorted. Valor was evolving into wrath, and Tyrael knew that eventually, it would move toward hatred and mass murder. Imperius would be driven to rule with an iron fist and was bound to destroy Sanctuary in the process.

Fate was slowly becoming lost within the endless scrolls in the library, unable to see any possible orderly outcome. Itherael would become helpless or, worse, begin to make decisions that would doom them all. And Auriel, who had recently been a prisoner of Despair, had already begun to lose sight of any hope in what would come and would rule out of fear, rather than from a sense of the goodness in all things.

The Heavens would soon be lost. The stone's corruption must be stopped. It would bleed the light from them all, sucking away what was good and holy and replacing it with darkness, violence, and death.

Tyrael's chill deepened, settling into his bones. Something changed; he sensed another strand of light that was powerful and ran deep, but unlike the others, this one's identity was strangely hidden to him. He tried to turn to seek it out, but it was elusive; it seemed to sense his own presence and move away, almost as if it were watching him.

Suddenly, that no longer mattered. The emotions he had formerly held in check began to overflow, and the strange light strand was lost. Chalad'ar was acting on him in ways he could not fully grasp, but his thoughts started to change as he saw where all these strands would lead. Death was the inevitable result of everything—the slow crumbling, the decay that must come. The end of all things. He understood the connections between all creatures, the threads that joined everything together. With this knowledge, what did life mean? Why value any single life in the pursuit of peace and balance, when death would come to all?

The people of Sanctuary were screaming.



Tyrael came to his senses covered in sweat. He found he had not moved from his position before the Fount, and he was clutching Chalad'ar in both hands as if it had fused to his flesh, his fingers turning white with strain.

His head pounded, the ache reaching through his neck and shoulders and down his spine. A dizzying wave crashed over him as the feelings he had experienced hit him again and again. His mortal flesh had never felt like such a prison, such a burden to overcome.

He had sensed things at the end, terrible things. He had sensed the coming deaths of countless souls, all of them burning in agony. He had sensed the darkness rising up among them, extinguishing all light. But that darkness had not come from the Hells.

As in his dreams, it had come from the angels.

Tyrael tucked the chalice into his robes. A feeling of utter hopelessness descended upon him as he turned his back on the Fount and walked the path out of Wisdom's realm. Using the chalice had bled energy from him to

such an extent that he felt like a hollow shell; mortals were never meant to experience such a thing, and the effects of its use could not be predicted, he knew. Tyrael could become lost, floating forever in the void between this world and the next, unable to find his way back through the strands as his physical form wasted away. The prospect of his own death cast a pall over everything, and he was strangely drawn to it in a way he could not quite understand. There was peace in endless sleep, an acceptance in giving up and letting go.

The thought was hypnotic.

You must not listen.

The archangel of Wisdom made his way back to more familiar surroundings, feeling lost and alone.

As he went, he did not notice the figure slipping from the shadows to follow him.

Chapter Nine



As the others gathered in their rooms at the Slaughtered Calf, the necromancer slipped quietly into the night through the back entrance to survey their surroundings. Zayl was not a social person—he preferred the company of the dead, if he were to be honest—and he knew that there was plenty of distrust of him among the group. It was easier to be alone.

But that wasn't the only reason for his vigilance. He remained unsettled after the appearance of the demons at the graveyard.

Zayl did not rattle easily, but he had continued to feel a disruption in the Balance. It was not Tyrael's presence that was causing it; something else was at work.

A very dangerous force was behind the recent attack; he was sure of it. And it reminded him of something he would rather forget.

"If you mean to loiter out in the cold, you could have at least wrapped me in a blanket," Humbart said. He sat in the palm of Zayl's left hand, his empty sockets staring out into the darkness. They had found a quiet space between the inn and the neighboring building where they would not be disturbed. Zayl crouched in the dust, his back to the wall.

"You're far beyond feeling a chill," Zayl said. He flexed his gloved right hand, feeling the bones move beneath the leather. It ached in cold like this, with the flesh long gone. The glove was padded to conceal the fact that the hand was nothing but skeletal remains connected by a few strands of mummified sinew. There was an unfortunate incident with a group of damned souls at the lost city of Ureh several years before, but he had managed to reattach what was left using a particularly powerful spell. It would never be the same, but it was functional, and that was enough.

"Be on guard, Humbart," Zayl said quietly. "Bring me back if anything should go wrong."

"Aye," Humbart said. "Just be quick about it. You know how it gives me the shakes, watching you do this. It's dangerous. There was the time in Salene's quarters when you lost control of your limbs to that damned black-hearted necromancer and nearly stabbed yourself with your own blade . . ."

Humbart went on, but the necromancer was no longer listening. Zayl closed his eyes, and the side of the building he faced receded, a gray mist descending over him. Once they had been schooled in the dark arts, the priests of Rathma needed to put up protective walls

around their psyches or risk being constantly distracted by the spirits of the dead.

Carefully, Zayl began to unravel those layers of protection, opening himself up to the world beyond.

Almost immediately, he sensed the souls of the departed that lingered in New Tristram, victims of violence who could not let go of the past; for many of them, death had come so suddenly they did not know they were dead. Others had unfinished business and were calling out for loved ones, pleading helplessly to be heard.

Still, the number of souls here was dwarfed by others he sensed nearby. Tristram was the site of unspeakable violence and death, and the taint of Diablo's corruption, King Leoric's possession, and the betrayal of Archbishop Lazarus remained. Many had died there. He had felt them in the graveyard earlier, but in this meditative state, he sensed their presence more strongly, their voices far more insistent.

Zayl probed deeper still, drifting higher above his physical body, leaving Humbart and the dark alley behind. New Tristram played out below him as he soared above the thatched roofs and people slumbering in their beds. Beyond the hills, he sensed the pack of hellions that had come upon them earlier, heading away from Tristram, their numbers depleted. Their energy was foul, to be sure, and he was glad to see that they had not followed the group to the inn.

But the hellions were not the source of the disruption in the Balance, either.

Zayl was uncertain which direction to turn. A chill worked its way through him. Something was nearby, but its exact location remained hidden to him. He felt certain this presence was aware of him, and it was not friendly.

The necromancer probed gently, hesitating for the first time that night. There was more than one of them. He sensed others hovering beyond the ring of light cast by the town. The creatures avoided his probing mind, but not because they were afraid. They wanted something else, and they were biding their time until they were ready.

These creatures held a strange power indeed. They did not appear to come from the Heavens or the Hells. He sensed that any wrong move could mean his death. Meeting his own end now would be unnatural, and his cycle of being would be disrupted, leaving him in a state of lingering agony that he would much prefer to avoid—

He sensed movement, like a wraith darting just beyond his sight. One of them had come closer. The chill deepened around him. The thing stank of the grave, a stench that permeated the air nearby and made Zayl nearly turn away.

But he would not. For he had recognized the essence of this foul,

black thing, even if he had no name for it and had only felt it once before.

It was the same kind as the creatures that had taken Salene.



Shanar sat on the small bed, bare legs curled up underneath her. Cullen stole glances when he imagined himself unobserved and thought that she looked like a young woman in such a pose. He had gotten a hint of her true age when she and the barbarian Gynvir had reminisced earlier that evening about past battles that had occurred twenty years ago; she must be forty years old, and yet she looked barely free from her twenties. She was beautiful indeed, but until now, he had not thought of her as vulnerable in any way. Rather, her skills and presence were formidable in spite of her slender frame.

If he were to be honest, Cullen found her intimidating. Yet that feeling was softened by her appearance now, her straight black hair free from its ponytail, her wizard's staff set aside, her face freshly washed with water from the basin.

Unable to sleep, Shanar and Gynvir had joined Cullen, Thomas, and Mikulov in one of the two rooms. Tyrael had gone downstairs, and Zayl had disappeared somewhere. Cullen knew enough not to question the activities of a necromancer, and apparently, the others did, too, for thus far, they had avoided the subject entirely.

"It's suicide," Shanar said. "There are eight of us and one talking skull against an army of angels. I'm as game for an adventure as anyone, but I'm telling you, those are some bad odds, even for a gambler."

As they continued to discuss the task that had been set before them, the small group's mood had grown increasingly bleak. Although Gynvir seemed more reluctant to question Tyrael's call to duty, Shanar felt betrayed to discover that the song she had been following had been engineered to draw her to Tristram. She had even begun to wonder about the resonance that had called her to El'druin so many years ago. Had she been manipulated then, too?

Cullen had tried (somewhat weakly, he admitted, tongue-tied by her beauty) to convince her that the simple fact that they had an archangel among them was astonishing enough and should be celebrated. But Shanar wasn't about to listen.

"He's a rogue," she said, looking around the group. "If we do this, we're acting against the will of the Heavens. How do we know this is the right choice? What if he's . . ." She made a gesture of frustration.

“If he’s wrong, we’re the ones who are going to suffer for it.”

Cullen sensed there was more to her doubt than that. Wizards were headstrong and independent as a rule, but history showed they could be persuaded to put aside their own needs for a common goal. Under other circumstances, none of them would have dared challenge an archangel’s authority. But Tyrael was a mortal now, no matter how imposing he was in physical form. Cullen had never personally seen an angel before, but from what he had read in many ancient texts, they were impressive enough to bring a man to his knees. The unfurling of wings made of pure energy . . . it was impossible to imagine.

“He has done this before,” Cullen said. “Many centuries ago, in the Hunt for the Three, for the Prime Evils—Diablo, Baal, and Mephisto—Tyrael assembled the first Horadrim to assist him. It was without the knowledge of the Angiris Council, which strictly forbids angels interfering with the world of men.”

The quest given to the original Horadrim, mages of great power and wisdom, was to imprison the three leaders of the Burning Hells within soulstones fashioned from shards of the Worldstone, burying them deep in the ground: one under the Zakarum Temple of Light, one under the sands of Aranoch, and the last under the Tristram Cathedral. Thomas and Mikulov had heard the story before, and even Gynvir had some knowledge of it, although it had been more of a legend than truth. But now they all listened carefully, seeming to give it more weight.

“Tyrael was successful then,” Cullen said. “Why not now?”

Shanar just shook her head. “It was different then. *He* was different. You said yourself it was a long time ago.”

The others were silent for a moment. All that most of Sanctuary knew about the Heavens and the eternal struggle between light and dark were stories, in the end. Stories of great feats by long-dead men. But Cullen had fought against the minions of evil and had seen the fall of the Dark One at the Black Tower. He had shared that fight with Deckard Cain, had grown to love him like a father before he had gone away, and Deckard had personally witnessed Tyrael’s shining wings unfurling in the shadows of the Pandemonium Fortress. Deckard had written about Tyrael’s unwavering commitment to humankind after Uldyssian’s sacrifice. He had written about so many things, and Cullen had never known him to embellish the truth.

Mikulov had been mostly silent, but now he uncoiled from the corner where he had been crouching perfectly balanced on the balls of his feet. The others all looked worn from their recent ordeal, but he appeared as calm and centered as ever.

“By all accounts, Tyrael has acted to protect Sanctuary when all

others would not," he said. "Deckard Cain, a man I respected more than any other in these lands, gave his life in service to the Heavens. The gods have spoken to me, and they have made it clear that Tyrael's calling is a worthy one. I will help him, to my last breath. Who will stand with me?"

Cullen nodded. Gynvir looked to Shanar, who shrugged. A wan smile crossed her lips. "If I said you have all lost your minds, would it make any difference?"

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. The Horadrim looked at one another. Gynvir drew her battle axe from where it was strapped to her muscled back.

Thomas opened the door carefully to find Zayl standing there in the flickering light of the lantern hung in the hall, his oddly hypnotic features seeming to shift in the shadows that played across them.

"There are creatures outside," he said. "We are being hunted. We must go at once."



They took a step back, but none of them invited him inside. "We must go," Zayl repeated. "Gather the others, quickly and quietly—"

"I told you to stay away, necromancer," Gynvir said, her hands moving on the handle of her axe. "I don't trust you or that damned thing you carry at your belt. The dead should remain at rest."

"Hey," Humbart said. "Watch who you're calling damned, woman!"

Shanar put a hand on the barbarian's arm, quieting her. Gynvir's voice was rough with anger, and Zayl wondered if she had some personal experience with another necromancer that had colored her view of him. But there was no time for such things now. He had to get them to understand.

"Dark forces are at work here," he said, looking at Thomas and Cullen. "You must listen to me. We risk the safety of the entire town —"

"There's no sense flapping your gums if they won't listen," the voice of the skull interrupted. Even from the pouch, it was loud enough to make everyone pause. "Save yourself, lad!"

"What is the meaning of this?" Tyrael stood in the hallway, looking from face to face.

"The dark gathers quickly," Zayl said. "There are creatures outside that are very dangerous, and I believe they are after someone in our group . . . perhaps all of us."

"I have felt it, too," Mikulov said from inside the room. "The gods

are restless tonight. Something has disturbed them.”

“Where’s Jacob?” Shanar asked. “Wasn’t he with you?”

“He left me in the tavern some time ago,” Tyrael said. “He said he was returning to these chambers to sleep.”

Shanar looked at Gynvir, who said nothing, her face seeming to darken further. The wizard brushed past them and into the hall, ducking into the other room, coming back out again a moment later, shaking her head.

“Not in there, either,” she said. The ashen color of her face belied her nonchalant manner. “I can’t say I’m surprised. He’s been known to wander off in his own little world—”

Her words were cut off by a bloodcurdling scream from somewhere outside.



Shanar was the first down the hall, calling Jacob’s name and moving so quickly she was gone before anyone had the chance to say a word. The necromancer followed, with Tyrael and the others fast behind him, rushing down the narrow stairs to the bottom floor.

The tavern was nearly empty now, most of the revelers gone to bed to sleep things off. Bron sat slumped at a table, snoring loudly; the bartender was gone and had left empty mugs and spilled mead everywhere.

Tyrael followed Zayl and the wizard through the back door. He was immediately hit by the cold; there was no wind, but the icy chill had deepened since he had last come inside, tightening his skin and causing him to pull his robes closer.

All torches and lanterns had been extinguished, and even the moon and the stars were no longer visible. Shanar muttered the words to a spell that sparked a blue glow from her staff, but even that feeble light was drawn away quickly and cast only the faintest shadows at her feet.

Tyrael gritted his teeth against the burning chill and drew El’druin from its sheath. The blade shone forth, knocking the darkness back. He stepped forward and sensed the others gathering behind him. Zayl had drawn his weapon, the necromancer’s serpentine blade glowing with its own eerie light. A blade bound to the dragon Trag’Oul, the Ancient One, Guardian of Sanctuary, and a creature of the stars, or so the priests of Rathma believed.

Moving slowly, Tyrael peered through the deep shadows that seemed to pool and shift. He followed the narrow path around the

corner of the inn to the front, where the wooden sign hung below a dark lantern and the cobblestone road ran off into emptiness.

A dull thud made him look up again; the sign had begun to swing back and forth on its chains, tapping against the post, although there was no wind.

"There!" Cullen pointed to their left, and Tyrael swung El'druin in that direction, his heart racing in his chest, fire coursing through his veins. *Show yourself.* A faint shape, little more than a deeper black against the shadows, flitted just beyond the edges of his sight and was gone. Tyrael waved the sword in a fiery arc, looking for anything he might strike against. But the road before them was empty.

Sounds came like bones cracking in the silence, long, slow, and unsettlingly eerie, the last few clicks drawn out as they faded away. The others whirled around to catch another fleeting glimpse of black. More of them.

Gynvir had unslung her axe, but whatever stalked them was gone again in an instant.

Tyrael turned back. He raised his sword, letting the light shine forth. Where the movement had come from, a few steps from the front door of the Slaughtered Calf, a motionless figure lay in the middle of the road.

The group came together around the body, forming a tighter circle as if to protect one another from the dark. It was a man who had been drinking at the bar, eyes wide and frozen in a deathly stare, his skin and hair bleached pure white, one hand extended in a claw, as if reaching for something. Zayl crouched over the dead man, removing a vial of thick liquid from his pouch. He passed this uncapped over the man's pale forehead, dripping the liquid in the pattern of a rune, which glowed softly and then faded. The bar patron's mouth appeared sunken, as if his teeth had been removed, and he looked twenty years older.

After a moment, the necromancer looked up. "There is nothing I can do for him," he said. "His spirit is gone, and for some reason, I cannot summon it."

"He must have come to investigate," Cullen said. "And something . . . took him."

"It drew him out for a reason," Thomas said. He looked around at the dark that pressed in against them.

The group was silent, with weapons ready, as the normal sounds of the night returned and lanterns began to glow once again, flames flickering back to life, bringing warmth and light. A few people emerged from nearby buildings. Not wanting to be seen, Tyrael led the others away from the lifeless body, and around the far corner of the inn, sitting propped against the wall, they found Jacob.

"I saw one," he said. He smelled of mead, but his eyes were clear. Each word seemed to take every ounce of energy he could muster. "Some kind of wraithlike thing with strange wings . . . it moved like an insect and was black as pitch. It hovered over me for a moment, and I felt it draw something from me . . . and I was so cold. I couldn't move. And then I heard you . . . and it was gone."

"I fear the healer gave us away," Thomas said. "This creature is some kind of scout for the others; I am sure of it. If I am right, there will be more here soon."

"I can invoke a spell to conceal us, for a time," Zayl said. "We will not be seen or heard, at least long enough to make our escape."

A shout came from the entrance to the inn, along with running feet. Someone had discovered the dead man, and it would surely not be long before one of Tyrael's party would be blamed for his murder. They were tired, and the road stretched before them. But New Tristram was no longer safe, and Tyrael could not afford to jeopardize the mission before it had even begun.

"It is time for each of you to make your decision," he said. "I have told you what we must do and why and the dangers that come along with such an attempt. You have seen this firsthand tonight—and it is only the beginning. We have much work to do to prepare, but we must do it as a team, if we have any chance to succeed. If you have doubts, now is the time to speak. All of you have the free will to leave."

He looked at each of them in turn, and they all nodded. For a moment, Tyrael felt the shame of using them in this way; none of them had the ability to truly understand what they were up against, not yet. Gynvir had helped get Jacob to his feet, and he stood unsteadily now. But he returned Tyrael's gaze unflinchingly.

"We're bound to this," Jacob said. "Whether we like it or not." He pulled the top of his robe aside to reveal a mark in the hollow just below his collarbone. It was dark red, like the pucker of an old wound, in the shape of a crescent. "The creature touched me here," he said. "I feel it, even now. These things will return, unless we find a way to stop them first."

"Very well," Tyrael said. "We leave for Bramwell now, before the dawn."

Chapter Ten



The Destroyer

Balzael was restless.

The Luminarei lieutenant paced back and forth before a wall of mounted trophies. The Halls of Valor were full of macabre items on display: the heads of fallen beasts with horns and slobbering mouths frozen in an endless snarl; regurgitators with bulging, sightless eyes; dark berserkers and hellions and many other demons, all of them slain in battle. They had been intentionally preserved just as they had died—in anguish, contorted, frenzied, looking as if they were about to immediately spring free and return to a semblance of life.

This outer room was for the lesser demons, of course. The archangel of Valor kept the biggest trophies in his inner quarters. Until recently, Balzael had always thought of the heads as reminders of victories in battle, meant to inspire new generations of angels to fight with courage and righteousness. Now, however, the trophies glowering over him felt like a viable threat, one that could seize control at any moment.

The Prime Evil's assault on the Heavens had changed the trophies the way it had changed everything else. Balzael had lost many Luminarei brothers and sisters, and his faith in the sanctity of these halls had been shaken to its core.

He was determined never to allow such a thing again.

No matter what the cost.

He was glad that Imperius agreed with him, at least to a point. After the near destruction of the Crystal Arch, Imperius had issued a directive to Balzael to step up the training of a small group of angelic destroyers called Sicarai to ensure that no such assault could ever happen again. One of the first efforts Balzael had undertaken was sending the Sicarai on secret missions to clean up packs of rogue demons wherever they could be found: the outskirts of the Hells, the Pandemonium Fortress, even Sanctuary itself. Although these demons were now largely leaderless and acted without much organization or impact, Imperius still viewed them as dangerous.

Any appearance on Sanctuary by angels had to be managed very carefully indeed, for many reasons. The rest of the Angiris Council had no knowledge of these secret cleanup missions and would not have approved them. But the world of men provided a good training ground for the Sicarai. The angelic destroyers struck deadly fast and moved on, and there was little concern for any humans who might get in the way; if there were mortal witnesses, the warriors simply

eliminated them.

The Guardian had other uses for the roving packs of demons, of course. But that was their secret.

And then Tyrael had jeopardized everything.

Balzael had watched Tyrael carefully these past few weeks, just as he had promised to do, had seen him wander through the Courts of Justice, peer into the Chalice of Wisdom at the empty Fount, and eat and sleep and piss and do all the things mortals did. The experience had done nothing but lower his regard for the former archangel and the path he had chosen. Balzael had done his best to convince Imperius that Tyrael should be imprisoned in the Fist and judged for his crimes. Mortals did not belong in the Heavens; Tyrael was proof of that. Humans were abominations and should be destroyed. But Imperius had resisted acting against the Council, in spite of all the evidence.

And then the fool had disappeared. Balzael had known immediately where he had gone, of course, but it had taken some time to find his exact location. Now he must take more drastic measures, but there was still a chance that Imperius would see the wisdom in eliminating the threat.

Balzael sighed, his impatience growing with every passing moment. Finally, the massive doors swung open, and the archangel of Valor swept in with fiery purpose, striding across the gleaming stone to where Balzael waited.

"He has been found," Imperius said. It was not a question. He knew that if Balzael had summoned him to meet, it was for one reason only.

Balzael nodded. "In a place called Tristram of Khanduras on Sanctuary. He has gathered a band of humans for a purpose that remains unclear."

"Humans . . ." Imperius paused. "How many?"

"Fewer than a dozen."

"Kill them, if you must. But take Tyrael alive, and bring him to me. I do not want him harmed."

"Are you certain? Is this not the time to acknowledge Tyrael's crimes, to take drastic action before he does something that cannot be undone?"

Imperius turned toward him, and Balzael resisted the urge to shrink back. He considered himself a fierce warrior, battle-hardened and afraid of nothing. But few among the angels could stand tall in the face of the archangel of Valor's wrath.

"Do not question me," Imperius said, his voice taking on an edge that Balzael knew too well. "I want him tried here in the Ring of Judgment, in front of those he used to call his brothers and sisters. He must stand as a symbol of the weakness of mortals in the realm of the

Heavens. It will make the case against Sanctuary that much stronger.”

“I do not mean to question you,” Balzael said carefully. “But if the Council still refuses to act, even after all this—”

Imperius reached out and slammed Balzael against the wall. The archangel’s grip was incredibly strong, and Balzael felt himself pinned and helpless. “The Council still rules the Heavens,” Imperius thundered. “It is not your place to argue about our methods or our findings. You will obey my orders!”

Balzael nodded, unable to speak. Finally, Imperius let him go. “I have summoned our best Sicarai here, and I will instruct him on what must be done,” Balzael said after a moment.

“Good.” Imperius abruptly turned and headed for the doors. “Do not fail in this, Balzael,” he said, pausing as he reached the exit. He did not turn to look back again before he pushed the doors open and disappeared.

I shall not fail, Balzael thought. Rage burned bright within him. *But it is not your orders I shall obey.*



Balzael preferred a more secluded space for his next meeting, one he used quite frequently. A meeting such as this required absolute privacy. What he had to say was of the utmost importance, and the true task he was about to assign must not be known to anyone else.

He walked the crushed stone paths of the Pools of Wisdom, trying to calm himself after the confrontation with Imperius. The pools had long been abandoned, dried up and silent, and the cold air muffled all sound. He did not hear the Sicarai warrior approaching. One moment he was alone, and the next he was not. Balzael kept his surprise to himself; he was far too disciplined for that, and if the destroyer noticed anything amiss, he did not react.

The Sicarai said nothing at all, only stood at attention, perfectly still. This was a magnificent fighting machine, Balzael had to admit, and one who was fiercely loyal to him and him alone. Balzael had made sure of that. The Sicarai vibrated with a red-tinted resonance that hung like a bloody mist around the shoulders of his golden armor. His chestplate was emblazoned with the sign of the Luminarei on the breast, a sunburst pattern that suggested endless wings in flight. Sicarai were known for their lack of mercy or forgiveness, a single-minded purpose, and Balzael had chosen the very best for this mission, an angel who had killed many demons and was feared as a relentless hunter, trained as an assassin, radiating power, large even

for his kind, and possessing a weapon that could destroy anything in its path.

Except, perhaps, for El'druin.

That remains to be seen.

“Our quarry has been spotted by scouts,” Balzael said without preamble. He watched the Sicarai carefully for any reaction, but the angel remained still. “I suspected Tyrael was hiding on Sanctuary. He is assembling a team of humans for a purpose I cannot yet foresee. Whatever his plans, he must not be allowed to follow them through. Do you understand me?”

For the first time, the Sicarai spoke. His voice was deep, powerful, cold in its measured response. “Yes, my lord.”

Balzael nodded. “The scouts are tracking Tyrael and his group, and you will join them,” he said. “Tyrael cannot be brought back to the Heavens to be tried for treason. We must act now. Kill him, and butcher those traveling with him.”

Balzael noticed something change in the Sicarai, an eagerness perhaps. The destroyer’s red aura quivered, like an animal trembling before being released for the hunt. A low, nearly inaudible sound had begun to emanate from him, a deep hum. Almost a snarl. The angel’s double-bladed weapon glowed at his side with its own fierce inner light.

“Go,” Balzael said. “Do not say a word about this to anyone. Be careful not to be seen. And do not stop until you succeed. Tyrael and all those with him must fall to your sword!”

The Sicarai gave him the Luminarei salute and was gone, moving so quickly and with such stealth that Balzael barely caught a fleeting glimpse of the warrior’s crackling energy before it dissipated and he was left alone once again.

Tyrael cannot be brought back to the Heavens to be tried for treason . . . Kill him, and butcher those traveling with him.

Personally, Balzael preferred the deed to be done with extreme prejudice. It would make their designs for Sanctuary that much easier to implement. The soulstone must have more time to influence the Council, and Tyrael was the only thing standing in the way of it. He had chosen to side with humans. Such meddling could ruin the Guardian’s plans. Although the Black Soulstone had been tainted with the essence of evil, it remained very powerful and could be used for a larger purpose.

To wipe the nephalem—and all of Sanctuary—from existence forever.

PART TWO



The Road to Westmarch

Chapter Eleven



A Birth at the Arch

It had been a number of human days since Tyrael had stood before the Fount at the Pools of Wisdom. The experience of peering into the chalice had begun to fade enough for him to feel some measure of comfort. He had seen the threads of time and emotion, had sensed their connections and perceived a possible future result. But Chalad'ar did not predict what was to come; it simply provided a way of understanding what could occur based on the here and now.

What he had seen did not have to become truth. Death would come for him, as it came for all mortals, but it need not come soon. And the Black Soulstone's slowly creeping tendrils—its corruption of the Heavens—could still be avoided if he could somehow get it away from its perch.

But time was running short.

He had received word through Auriel's messenger that the Council had refused to act on his advice. Tyrael's role as Wisdom had been minimized, their confidence in him clearly shaken. For eons, the goal of the archangels had been to defeat the Burning Hells and strive for ultimate peace. But lately, Tyrael had sensed a lust for blood beyond anything he had felt before. He was certain that they were conspiring against him and that if he remained in the High Heavens, his days of freedom were numbered.

But one day, he awoke to an unusual resonance from the Arch echoing through the soaring spaces of the Silver City, and all that was put aside for the moment.

He knew what the Lightsong meant: a new angel would be born.

Several angels had been born at the Arch since his choice to become mortal, but he could only watch and not take part in the birthing ceremonies, knowing that he was an outsider. Tyrael dressed hurriedly, his fingers fumbling at his robes. He hated mortal clothing, the time it took, the feel of the fabric against his skin. It reminded him of what he had given up, not what he had become.

Outside, he joined the growing stream of angels moving toward the Silver Spire. If they realized who he was, they did not show it; no one reacted to his mortal status, all attention riveted to the spire, as if in a trance. And what if they did? he thought. He was still a member of the Council, even if they no longer listened to him. Had he fallen so far, so fast, that the last of his pride had dried up and blown away upon the wind?

Chastised by his own thoughts, Tyrael stood tall among them. The day was a brilliant, shining blue, the air crisp and fresh, and the song made the very stones hum beneath his feet as he walked, growing in intensity as the

spire grew close. The angels resonated in harmony with the Lightsong, but the sound did not emerge from their immortal throats; instead, it came in a thrumming energy as they vibrated to a perfect pitch. In the courtyard, he could see a throng of angels gathering under the soaring structure. Although he had seen the spire countless times, it remained magnificent, and as with everything else, his newly mortal soul viewed it with fresh appreciation. Its height was nearly impossible to comprehend, rising like twin blades, crystalline facets glittering. Circular ringed platforms thickened the base, while other, smaller towers and spires rose up around it, and near the top was a structure like angels' wings, where the Crystal Arch was housed.

The spine of Anu.

Anu was the very first being, the One, from which all others had been created, made of light and dark, good and evil. The One had cast out evil, but that evil had formed the beast-dragon Tathamet, the first Prime Evil, and the two beings had become locked in conflict for eons before their final battle resulted in a massive explosion, spreading their essences far and wide and creating the universe itself. The scar from that event had become Pandemonium, while Tathamet's seven heads had birthed the seven Great Evils of the Burning Hells, his body forming the foundation for their realms. Anu's spine had come to rest to form the Crystal Arch, and all of the High Heavens had sprung to life around it.

This was ancient history to Tyrael, and over the many centuries, the knowledge had become such a central part of him that he rarely thought of it. But as he made his way ever closer to the massive spire, the legend felt fresh once again in his mind, the wonder of the universe's creation breathtaking to consider. All order, light, and peace had come to reside here in the High Heavens, while chaos, darkness, and evil had found a place in the Hells. The two sides continued to battle each other through the Eternal Conflict, neither one able to gain the upper hand. And somewhere in between, full of the potential of each side and capable of acts of both astonishing kindness and shattering violence, lay Sanctuary and the human race.

He was fascinated by this struggle between good and evil within every human soul. The same struggle of Anu and Tathamet, multiplied again and again on a smaller scale. Good and evil, light and dark, life and death. Where did humans go after passing? Where would he go now? He knew that humankind had many theories, but the truth was elusive.

For some reason, Tyrael thought of the chalice still nestled near his breast. He felt compelled to use it again, and yet he dared not. He was afraid of what he might see.



The angels who had already gathered under the spire nearly filled the vast courtyard, but as a member of the Council, Tyrael was justified in claiming a spot at the Arch itself.

The angels noticed him now, as he made his way through. He held his head high, daring them to challenge him. None did. It took him time to ascend. Bands of light rippled through intricate patterns and grooves in the crystal like water and then flared in spectacular bursts from the spire as he neared the top, pulsing in time with the song, so bright they hurt his eyes. He resisted holding a hand up to shield them and climbed the steps to the platform.

Those in attendance at the summit of the Arch were Imperius's angels; the new angel born today would be assigned to the Halls of Valor, and it was customary for that realm's brothers and sisters to pay tribute.

The birth of a new angel could occur only when light and sound were in perfect harmony, resonating at a synchronized pitch that led to a tremendous surge of power. The spine of Anu birthed these angels as finite aspects of itself. It was said that only when an angel died could another be born.

Huge diamond crystals rose up on all sides, shimmering as they produced wave after wave of brilliant light that met in the center now, hovering above the angels. The movement was building in intensity, pulsing ever faster, and the resonance had reached a pitch that was nearly deafening to Tyrael's mortal ears. The spectators' vibration increased along with it. The Lightsong was no longer soothing to him, and his senses were being assaulted. Everything Tyrael saw and heard had changed since that fateful day in the Angiris Council chamber when he had shed his wings. He felt as if he had lived two lives—the first as an immortal, another after becoming a mortal—and they were entirely separate from each other.

How could he possibly stay here among the angels for one more day?

Suddenly, he felt like an abomination, a mutation of all that was good and holy. He turned to go, but the throng pushed forward as the song grew. Feeling as if his ears might burst, he gritted his teeth and turned back. The light pulses were joining at one brilliant spot above him, where fine, threadlike filaments crackled and snapped across one another. The strands began to weave themselves together, forming an intricate mat that rolled into an orb, and within it, he could see a wriggling shape made of a light so bright he could not look directly at it.

But something was wrong.

He began to notice a discordant tone in the air. One of the threads of light had turned gray, so thin it looked like a hairline crack across the

surface of the birth orb. But it was there; he could not deny it.

Tendrils of light continued to snap upward from Anu's spine and wrap around the shape within, adding to it, and the resonant song kept building. But that one note, so faint it was barely audible, was just slightly off pitch. It made Tyrael wince and look around at the quivering angels, their wings extended in ecstasy. Did no one else feel it?

Perhaps the tone was coming from him. Perhaps his presence here as a mortal was causing the change. But when he put a hand on his own chest, he felt no vibration, no resonance at all, and the core of him was empty and silent.

The thing inside the orb was growing quickly. He could see the outline of furred wings, the radiance of the angel swelling moment by moment. At the height of the Lightsong, the orb suddenly burst apart, sending the strands of light crackling over the crowd, and the new angel unwrapped its wings as the light and sound reached a crescendo, hovering above the other angels in a magnificent display of power.

The other angels' Lightsong pulsed gently, a sign of acceptance and welcome. It was a female. The moment should have been transcendent, joyful, breathtaking. But there was a subtle change that cast shadows where none should be, as if the gray filament wrapped like a snake around the birth orb had incorporated itself into her essence, and although the Lightsong should have matched the new angel in perfect harmony, her resonance was the slightly different pitch that grated at Tyrael's ears and seemed at odds with the others.

The angels still did not seem to detect it. They were buzzing with excitement. He had hoped to be inspired by the birth, reconnected with the Heavens in some way, but he could not join in the song, his physical senses bruised, his mortal eyes and ears burning. Again, he felt like a stranger here among the immortal.

The Lightsong filled him with dread.

It is the stone, Tyrael thought. Its foul tendrils have reached the Arch and corrupted the birth.

The idea chilled him in a way nothing else could. The stone's influence was spreading even faster than he had thought possible.

Tyrael turned again and stumbled away, his entire body aching, his mind reeling with terrible possibilities. He was alone in this, one against an army of angels. The entire fate of the Heavens fell on his broad shoulders. If he failed . . .

But he could not. There was no other option, not now. He must find the solution to the soulstone's black sickness before it was too late.

The angels parted before him. He went blindly, with stinging eyes, until a voice stopped him short.

"You dare come here today?"

Tyrael blinked, trying to see through the haze of pain. Balzael stood

before him. The other angels had grown silent. The space they had cleared had been for the Luminarei lieutenant, not for him.

“Behold, my brothers and sisters, Wisdom comes as a mortal to stand before the Arch, but his eyes burn and his ears bleed! Is he not an insult before Anu and all that is holy?”

Tyrael’s throat ached. “I am still your brother.”

“You are an immortal who chose to leave his own kind and stand with the human race!” Balzael addressed the crowd. “The mighty Tyrael, who served as Justice and fought against our enemies on the battlefield, will no longer take his place among the archangels. And now he comes here, on a day of celebration, to dirty the Arch with his filth!” Balzael pointed at him. “Your moment of reckoning is fast approaching.”

Anger rose up in Tyrael, harsh and unbidden, threatening to send him blindly forward with the intent to claw at Balzael with his bare hands. But there were too many others here, and he knew that if he did so, the Luminarei guards would take him, and his last chance to save the Heavens would be gone.

He bit down hard on his rage. “Are you here to arrest me, Balzael? Because if you try, it will not go well for you.”

Balzael chuckled. “You will be judged, but it will not be by me. The Council meets tomorrow without you. They will decide your fate.”

Tyrael hid his surprise. So that was the way it would happen: a staged debate by the remaining Council, a vote to put him on trial for treason. He thought of his old comrade Inarius and his defection from the Heavens, which led to the eventual creation of Sanctuary. Inarius was branded a traitor, but he was one of the few angels who ever dared to make a stand and break from the Eternal Conflict, leaving the High Heavens forever.

Now Tyrael was being forced to do the same.

There is a solution.

It came to him all at once, and as soon as the plan took shape, he wondered how he had not thought of it before: a desperate plan, to be sure, but similar in some ways to one he had tried many centuries ago. Once again, he would have to rely on the people of Sanctuary to succeed. But this would be even more dangerous, the odds against success even higher.

The chalice had done it. Somehow, Chalad’ar had heightened his senses, given him insights that he had not previously possessed. Tyrael was certain of it. What that meant, good or bad, he could not know, and he had little time left to ponder it. He had much to prepare. So be it . . . he would not be here come morning.

He would leave the Heavens immediately, cutting ties with his brothers and sisters. He would call together a team of gifted humans (in his mind, he had already begun vetting the names of those who might be suitable) and begin their training. And they would infiltrate the Heavens, steal the stone, and hide it away where it could never be recovered.

In time, the angels would come to understand his choice. They must, or everything he worked for would be in vain.

“Come find me when you are ready, then,” he said. “If you dare.”

Tyrael swept by the Luminarei without another word as the crowd parted to let him go.

Chapter Twelve



The Guards of Bramwell

Tyrael awoke with a start. The memory of the tainted angel's birth had crept into his dreams, and his heart pounded with renewed anger at the confrontation with Balzael at the Arch. It was the last he had seen of the Luminarei lieutenant; the archangel would not give the Council the satisfaction of coming for him in his former chambers. He had opened a portal and left the Heavens immediately afterward, bringing only his writings, the contents of his rucksack, and the clothes on his back.

The chalice had remained hidden in his robes since he had taken it from the Fount. Each time he used it, he was assaulted by another wave of pure emotion. Death floated over everything—the end of all things. There was peace in endless sleep, in giving up and letting go. The thought was hypnotic. When he was inside the chalice, the alternative possibilities were stripped away, and truth became obvious. He must protect the Heavens from the stone. The appearances of the demon pack and the creatures outside the Slaughtered Calf were not coincidences. Forces were gathering against them even now, meant to stop the new Horadrim and destroy Sanctuary, once and for all.

But when he returned to the mortal world, the emptiness the chalice left behind was nearly overwhelming. The frailties and weaknesses of each member of his new team were clear, and the task of preparing them for what would come seemed insurmountable, the odds of success next to none.

Each time had left him more drained than the last and yet hungry for more. The insights he drew from the chalice's depths gave him a strange solace; although he saw the long odds that they were up against, he also saw that he had made the right choice—the only choice—in coming to Sanctuary.

They would steal the soulstone or die trying.

Tyrael looked around at the others, still sleeping in the early dawn light. The fire had long since gone cold, and a layer of frost whitened the ground. After many days' travel, they were nearing Bramwell. The group had skirted the Gulf of Westmarch as the area grew into hills and had made camp in the woods, some distance off the road. Zayl's spell of concealment had kept them hidden from any travelers they met along the way. The necromancer had proved to be a valuable asset so far, but the rest of the group kept their distance from him, as if he had a communicable disease. Even now, while the others lay

close together for warmth, he slept apart from them with only the skull for company.

Cullen had cornered Tyrael yesterday as they walked and peppered him with questions, fascinated with the Heavens and Tyrael's transformation to a mortal. Tyrael had answered them as best he could but had quickly tired of the exercise. The man's thirst for knowledge was insatiable, and as they had walked on, Tyrael had become more aware of the aches and pains of his physical body. It was difficult for him to keep his patience. He had had little sleep or food for days now and was not used to such feelings of discomfort. But Cullen would not let him be.

Tyrael smiled wanly in the dim light. Cullen was snoring lightly, and without his round glasses and with his face smoothed in slumber, he looked years younger. In spite of the frustrations, Tyrael was growing fond of the little man. There would be a time, he knew, when Cullen's studies would become essential to their mission.

He glanced at the spot where the monk had been the night before, but it was empty. He did not remember Mikulov closing his eyes. The monk rarely slept. Over the past several days, he had taken on a slightly haunted look, his gaze distant, as if seeing things the others did not. The monks of Ivgorod were spiritual beings, in tune with their natural surroundings and their gods in ways far beyond most humans' understanding. He had scouted ahead as they traveled each day, slipping like a ghost through the woods and along the road to watch for danger. When he returned, the haunted look was always in his eyes, and Tyrael wondered what Mikulov knew that he wasn't sharing with the rest of them.



Mikulov stood in the shadows of the trees, just off the road that led to Bramwell. His senses had been honed over many years of training and focus at the Floating Sky Monastery, and he picked up things others did not. Right now, he was waiting patiently for another sign of the exact location of the people up ahead.

There were two of them. They stood quietly, rarely speaking, but their shifting weight and shuffling feet gave them away. Their behavior suggested the intent to conceal themselves, and that was what concerned Mikulov. If they had come walking up the middle of the road, he would have simply directed his small party to remain in the woods until the strangers had passed. But they had not.

These two were waiting for something.

The monk's patience could far outlast theirs. He stood lightly on the balls of his feet, perfectly balanced even after standing motionless for two hours. During that time, he had let his mind explore all that had led up to this strange journey. It was a state of both meditation and alertness, a symbiosis of mind and body well known to the monks of Ivgorod, and it allowed him to keep watch while turning his consciousness inward.

He tried to make sense of the winding threads and the vision that had been given to him last night. They would not come together.

Ever since the battle with the risen dead and the fall of the Dark One from the Black Tower ten years ago, Mikulov had sensed a shift within himself, a swelling of elemental power so breathtaking he would not have believed it was possible. Before that time, he thought he had mastered many of the secrets of becoming one with all things, but he had been a fool. He had only scratched the surface. That moment at the tower when he had released the energy he held at his core—when he had exploded like a tiny sun and laid waste to the enemy that was about to overwhelm him—had freed something inside him. He was faster, stronger, and able to influence the natural world around him like never before. For the first time in his life, he understood the balance and harmony that his master had preached when he was a boy.

But what does it mean?

He did not know. But he knew the gods had a plan for him. He had been warned about the dangers Sanctuary faced. They had shown him a vision of destruction and horrible suffering: earthquakes ripping the ground asunder, fire from the skies, humans across the land writhing in agony as the flesh was burned from their bones. He had seen the Horadrim torn limb from limb by huge black-winged creatures.

What had shocked him the most was that the End of Days would come from the Heavens themselves.

The vision was so powerful and disturbing that Mikulov could not bring himself to describe it to Thomas and Cullen. But the revelation did not change his purpose. He was being called for a reason. Sanctuary was in terrible danger. Mikulov knew he must discover his rightful path and act swiftly.

While the others had slept the night before, Mikulov had slipped away under cover of darkness, moving easily across the uneven ground to a bluff overlooking the gulf. Wind rippled his robes as he stood watching the black water crash against rock far below. He listened to the voices of the gods in that wind, in the smell of the surf, in the moisture that touched his skin, and in the taste of salt on his tongue. He felt the prickle of energy gathering within him. He was ready.

The dark sky above him opened up, and a staircase made entirely of light appeared. Mikulov set his foot upon the first step and found it bore his weight, and he climbed higher and higher, the water churning far below, the thick woods and steep hills falling away. Finally, the world disappeared entirely, and still he kept climbing, faster and faster, his legs a blur, wind whipping at his body, until he reached a plateau, and a massive, shining structure appeared before him: columns surrounded stone and crystal gates, intricate designs like angels' wings carved into their surfaces and aglow with raw power.

The Diamond Gates of the High Heavens. It seemed that someone had spoken; he turned to find that the others stood beside him now, the wizard, the barbarian, Thomas and Cullen and Jacob and Tyrael, their weapons out and ready as a war cry rose like thunder from within the silver-tipped city, which reached above them like a glittering, polished landscape of crags and cliffs and pointed spires.

The gates swung open. *Do not enter here*, another voice said. The necromancer Zayl stood some distance apart, his bone dagger shining in his gloved hand. *The Balance is broken, and there is only death behind these walls.* But Tyrael stepped forward, leading them into a beautiful courtyard, the scope of the city spreading out before them like a perfectly shaped jewel. This beauty should have been heartbreaking, but a chill crept over him, and the emptiness, the sheer size, left him hollow and hopeless.

They stood close together, a tiny speck in this vast place, and the gates slammed shut behind them as a horde of angels appeared, a seemingly endless line of them in flight, surging closer and darkening the sky. The monk prepared for battle. But the angels did not attack Mikulov's group. The horde swept over them and toward Sanctuary to carry out their slaughter of innocents, and moments after their passage, the screams of the dying rose up in a horrible wave cresting at their backs.

The screams went on and on. Mikulov ran to the gates, pounded on them with his fists, but his powers were useless here.

They were trapped while Sanctuary burned.

He turned back from the gates, looking to Tyrael for help. The archangel stood before them in silence. His form began to change, lengthening and thinning, his limbs stretching into long bones and then to empty sleeves, robes darkening as he loomed over them. Moments later, Tyrael was gone. In his place was a terrifying figure in black holding a long, wickedly curved blade in both hands. His face was an empty hole.

Mikulov cried out, but it was too late. The figure lifted the blade and swung it in a vicious, whistling arc, catching Thomas under the chin. A fountain of blood spouted toward the sky as Thomas's head

toppled from his shoulders, and his body shuddered before falling lifeless to the ground.



The sound of movement brought Mikulov instantly away from his trance. He never flinched, but a thin line of sweat ran down his gleaming skull and across the tattoo that covered his back and told the story of his life. In his meditative state, he had relived the vision yet again, and it was as powerful as ever. The slaughter had been terrible, but the worst of it had been Tyrael's betrayal.

The archangel had led them into a trap and then cut them down like animals.

What did it mean? Mikulov did not know. Not yet. But he did not have time to ponder it further; someone was coming down the road.

The new arrivals made no real effort to conceal themselves. One of them coughed, grunted, and another muttered a curse before stopping.

The monk left his spot in the woods and slipped noiselessly through the trees, a blur of motion in the morning gloom. Two men in silver armor stood talking in low voices, swords buckled at their sides, orange sashes around their waists, their heads bare. Knights of Westmarch, by the look of them, although the color of the sashes they wore was different from what Mikulov had encountered in his journeys through these lands.

Strange. What were knights doing here?

One of them gave a low whistle. A moment later, two more figures in the same armor emerged from the woods on the opposite side of the road. The four men huddled together and one of them gave a hearty laugh before the two from the woods retreated up the road, and the new arrivals took their place, disappearing between the trees.



"Knights," the monk said. "They came to relieve two others who had been on watch. What for, I cannot say."

Cullen pondered this for a moment. The Knights of Westmarch had grown from the paladins brought west by Rakkis, founder of the kingdom and city of Westmarch. The knights had dedicated themselves to serving the Light and defending the innocent. They had protected Westmarch from its enemies for many years and had

remained righteous even as the Zakarum Church had fallen from grace. But he couldn't see why they would be here.

"I don't know of a strong knight presence in Bramwell," Cullen said. "Perhaps they are on their way to Westmarch? But why guard the road?"

"Regardless, we must be careful," Tyrael said. "We can avoid these two easily enough, but there may be spies in other places along the way. Drawing attention too soon could ruin our plans. We are several miles from the city. When we arrive, let me do the talking, and follow my lead."

Chapter Thirteen



The Blacksmith's Shop

Bramwell was built into the base of the mountainside overlooking the Gulf of Westmarch. It was made up of two- and three-story stone buildings with thatched roofs, modest in size and worn by the wind and rain that often swept through these lands. An inlet that ran into the Sweetwater River allowed the city to maintain a shipping channel and had kept it alive during hard years. A booming whaling industry had long since fallen off, and the inhabitants now survived mostly on farming and trade through Westmarch and Kingsport, shipping their expertly forged weapons and armor to those cities and all the way to Caldeum.

As the group crested a hill and the sun broke through the mid-morning sky, the city sat nestled before them in the arms of the mountains. It had been years since Jacob had been here, and although he remembered the beautiful setting—the sparkling water of the gulf and the hard line of the breakwater, the steep hills and the squares of farmland outside the walls—the city itself had changed. The buildings looked restored, and the walls had been fortified, built up at least ten feet higher than before.

He remembered the campgrounds outside the city, where merchants had gathered, hoping to do business, but they were abandoned and empty now. Bramwell's heavy iron gates were closed tight, which seemed strange for a city built on trade.

The gates were also heavily guarded. As they made their way down the final hill, four men in knight armor stepped out from stone guard huts built on either side of the road.

"State your business," the largest of them said, a man with a ruddy complexion and a thick beard. He wore a helmet and carried a heavy sword and shield, and he stood in the middle of the road before the gates as if daring them to enter.

"I am a merchant from Caldeum," Tyrael said. "We need to speak with Borad the blacksmith."

The knights shifted, glancing at one another, and the largest man relaxed slightly. "Remove your weapons," he said. "No one enters the gates of Bramwell armed."

Jacob looked at Tyrael. Handing over El'druin to these thieves? A chill ran through him at the thought of it. But Tyrael shook his head.

"The road is a treacherous one," he said. "We carry too much gold from the palace guard to surrender our swords." He met the man's gaze with his own. "Take it up with Borad if you must."

“You don’t look much like traders—” another guard said. But the leader put up a hand as if he had made a final decision, silencing him.

“Very well,” he said. “Follow me.”



The guards led them through the streets as people turned to stare. Something had spooked the citizens, Jacob thought; that much was clear. He knew his traveling party looked nothing like merchants, of course, but the impression he received from these people was more than suspicion of a group of strangers.

It was fear.

As strange as this was, Jacob welcomed the distraction. The embarrassment he had felt after his behavior at the Slaughtered Calf remained at the back of his mind, ever present when he had a moment’s peace. He had become a blubbing, drunken fool in front of Tyrael and the others, including Shanar, and his refusal to accept the duties the archangel had asked of him—his petty arguments and self-pity—made him cringe. He had always prided himself on his commitment to justice and the protection of innocents. He had dedicated his life to it. Now was the time to embrace that commitment, not shrink from such a duty.

How had he wandered so far off his path? The loss of El’druin had become a crutch for his own doubts and weaknesses, and Shanar’s disappearance from his life had only reinforced those doubts. But she was back now, whatever the reason, and he had to show her—show all of them—that he could be trusted. There was too much at stake to fail.

One thing was certain: the creature he had seen outside the inn had scared him sober, its touch like an ice pick to his soul. Even now, he could feel it deep inside his breast. Something told him he was very lucky to be alive and that most others would not have survived such an encounter. Why he was spared, he did not know. But it had communicated to him a message that he had kept playing through his head for reasons he could not quite understand. A warning, of sorts.

We are coming for you, sooner or later, as we came for your mother and father and your kin before them. We always do.

As the small group progressed through the city streets, the number of people following them grew, so that by the time they reached the upper limits, there was a grim parade tailing behind them. The guards led them to a fairly modest home near the city walls that overlooked the valley and the gulf. A building twice the size sat behind it,

surrounded by a patch of dead grass and a path worn down to the dirt. Thick black smoke poured from double chimneys, and the *whoosh* of bellows came from inside.

The people finally began to disperse after the guards put their hands on the hilts of their swords and ordered them back. The lead guard knocked hard on the door and waited.

The harsh clang of metal on metal ceased for a moment. The guard knocked twice more, but the hammering started up again. He glanced at his companions, then slipped the catch and entered. The others followed.

It was blazing-hot inside. Prickles of moisture sprang up on Jacob's brow and the small of his back, the heat burning his lungs. The air wavered, making objects seem to ripple and change. Wire brushes, jigs, and fullers lay on tables or hung on hooks next to grinding stones. A fire roared in a hearth at the far end, where a huge man wearing a thick leather apron and glistening with sweat hammered at a white-hot edge of metal on an anvil, his arms bare to the shoulders.

The guards waited for him to finish. He worked quickly and with impressive skill, honing the edge of metal to a thin blade, before he looked up and finally acknowledged them. After setting the sword in a bucket of water, he wiped the sweat from his brow with a cloth and walked toward the lead guard.

As the man approached, Jacob heard a brief intake of breath from the necromancer; Jacob thought Zayl might have recognized him, although it was difficult to say.

A quick explanation followed, but before the guard could finish, the huge man waved him away. "I'm Borad Nahr," he said, gripping Tyrael's hand and holding it for an extra beat as he kept Tyrael's gaze. Whatever he saw there seemed to satisfy him. "Been expecting you. Garand, take the men back down the hill and watch the woods."

The guard hesitated just a moment and then nodded, backing out of the room and closing the door. The blacksmith wiped his brow again and removed his apron, taking his time before hanging it on a hook. He kept his back to them. The others waited. "You bring word from Westmarch?" Nahr said, only half-turning toward them, in a voice filled with a mix of anticipation and dread. Most of his face was in shadow.

"We come from the road to Tristram," Tyrael said. "Your guards are vigilant. We stumbled upon four of them in the woods on our journey. But now you send them away before speaking plainly. Are you expecting some sort of trouble?"

"They are loyal," Borad Nahr said. "But one can never be too careful, not today." He finally turned fully to face them, his eyes shining in the firelight. "Now, give me the word from my son, and

make it quick.”

His son? “You’re no blacksmith,” Jacob said.

The huge man’s eyes narrowed slightly as he looked Jacob up and down, then moved on to the others, lingering on Zayl. Whatever Nahr saw seemed to set him more at ease, for his shoulders relaxed slightly. “My father was the best in the land,” he said, “and he taught me well before I joined in service to the king. My skills in battle were needed then, as they are now, more than ever.” He motioned to the fire and his tools. “This I do when I need to think. It calms my mind. But you’re not here to talk about smithing, and I’ve misjudged your purpose. Perhaps I shouldn’t have let you in so easily.”

“We mean you no harm,” Tyrael said. “If you would indulge us for a few minutes, perhaps we could explain—”

“If you were assassins, you would have made your attempt already,” Nahr said, holding up his hand. “And you’re not in league with Norlun; that much is clear. He would never entertain the likes of you. Anything else can wait until there’s food in your bellies. You look like you’d eat a rat to survive.”

As if in answer, Jacob’s stomach rumbled. He looked around at the others. There had been little to eat over the past few days except for dried meats and stale bread that they had brought in their rucksacks. It was nearly noon. A good meal would be more than welcome.

Tyrael nodded his thanks.

“Come on, then,” Nahr said. “Let’s find something warm.”



He took them into the modest home, where another fire burned on the hearth and stew thickened in a pot that hung above the flames. It smelled delicious. “My men often eat with me,” Nahr said, “but today you’ll take their place. It’s early for venison, but I’ll wager you could use it.”

He spooned large quantities into wooden bowls and set them down on a table in a small room overlooking the building from which they had come. The group set at the food ravenously, and Nahr watched them from a seat in a well-worn chair near the window.

“Thought you were carrying a message from Lorath,” he said, as the bowls rapidly grew empty. He lit a cigar and puffed at it, his gaze going distant. “Why it took eight of you to deliver it was what worried me. I was afraid . . .” He shook his head, his eyes focusing again on his guests. “But you have nothing to deliver, and it’s clear you’re not merchants from Caldeum or any other place.”

He stood up and turned to the window, his broad shoulders set, the cigar's crumbling ash falling unheeded onto the wide, worn floor planks. "You might ask why I invited you to a meal, after you played us all for fools with that Caldeum story," he said. "I recognized one of you from long ago. That, and the dreams . . ." He shrugged. "I saw you coming, you might say."

"You're the former commander of the Knights of Westmarch," Zayl said. "I remember you. You were under General Torion, if I recall."

The large man turned back. "Yes. Commander Nahr, at your service. One of his closest advisers, years ago. I work closely with him still, along with the duke of Bramwell. And you helped us rid the city of a plague of demons back then." He nodded. "The knights don't make it a rule to trust one of your type. But Lady Salene grew fond of you, didn't she? How is she now? Does the house of Nesardo still stand with the king?"

A shadow crossed Zayl's face. "She is gone," he said. "Taken by black-winged things—beasts of some other realm. I tried to save her, but I was too late. She delivered a message to me, that I was to seek a man of your description in Bramwell and that you hold information vital to the safety of these lands. But I did not know it would be you."

The commander sagged, then sat heavily in his chair. "It grows worse every day," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "There is evil at work in Bramwell; we have seen it. Seen *them*, the black-winged devils of which you speak. They steal our citizens away in the night. The duke has fallen ill with some sort of plague, although no healers can help him. And in the midst of it all, Norlun would dare try to use this to his advantage . . . It makes me wonder." He realized his cigar had burned down to a stub and put it out, then looked at Tyrael. "Tell me what you want," he said. "Perhaps we can help each other."

Chapter Fourteen



Tyrael explained as best he could, leaving out all mention of the High Heavens and the soulstone. They were a party of spellcasters and warriors, driven together by a quest to rid Sanctuary of the black-winged creatures that the necromancer had mentioned and to bring peace once again to the land. They were also in search of the location of a place of great power, one that could contain the key to stopping the evil that stalked the people of Bramwell.

The explanation skirted the truth, but instead of becoming more skeptical at this talk of magic and demons, Nahr told them more about the sightings of such creatures. They were elusive, barely within sight for more than a moment, like phantoms in the dark. The people were terrified, he said. It began with dreams, haunting the sleep with a feeling of hopelessness and visions of terrible death and destruction, before a loved one would disappear, never to be seen again. He had stepped up the patrols of the city walls and the roads leading in and out, but even a few guards had gone missing, vanishing without a trace.

"I've been here in Bramwell more than five years and have never seen the people so afraid," he said. "I came to this city on a special mission under General Torion's orders, to secure it as a stronghold of the knights so Bramwell would serve King Justinian should Westmarch descend into chaos. Even then, the general could see what was coming to Westmarch . . . what I fear is now upon us."

"Is that city haunted, as this one is?" Tyrael asked.

"That may be," Nahr said. "But General Torion is more concerned with the templar, and with good reason."

"Templar?"

"Aye. They're a secretive order. Many have never heard the name, but those who haven't soon will. They began as an extension of the Zakarum Church and the knights themselves. But they took on their own customs, converting their soldiers through dastardly means. From what I know, these converts were often born-again felons, thieves, and murderers, their minds wiped clean through torture and starvation."

"I know something of them," Cullen said. "But there is precious little to go on. The templar now rejoice in violence and blood, claiming a holy mission to cleanse Sanctuary of evil. They may have been more honorable at some point, but from what I understand, today they bring far more evil themselves than they take away."

"The leader of the main templar order is someone they call the

grand maester. I don't know where he resides. But the sect that has grown like a weed in Westmarch is perhaps even more extreme than the rest. It is led by a man named Norlun, a snake who would kill his own mother if it suited his purpose. They've quietly gained control of the cathedral in Westmarch and are using it as a base of operations for their dark deeds. General Torion believes they are preparing to assault the knights and attempt to control the palace. My own son Lorath—he has a touch of spellcaster in him, I do say—is a member of Torion's guard there." Nahr hesitated. "Lately, there have been more disturbing rumors about the true origins of the templar initiates. They have gained a few recruits from the knights themselves, good men, far from beggars and thieves—most, I fear, are acquired by force and torture. I await word every day that Lorath has fallen to them."

"I've heard stories of a few travelers to Westmarch disappearing without a trace," Cullen said.

"They are stealing ordinary citizens and soldiers and forcing them into service. General Torion believes the templar are also responsible for the disappearances here. I am not so sure. But the people cannot sleep, and the duke is no longer able to command the guard. I am preparing my men here for the word to come from Westmarch, and we will go to their aid against the templar. I only hope we don't lose half our forces while we wait."

It made some sense that the things they had seen would be tied to such an order, Tyrael thought. If the templar were indeed recruiting by force, the dark-winged beasts could be their unholy messengers.

Did the templar have the power to conjure and control such creatures? That was far less likely. Another, more disturbing thought had occurred to him; he wondered if it was possible that Imperius had already begun his reign of terror in Sanctuary, and the creatures were some kind of force from the High Heavens, the first wave of a much more violent attack.

But even as the Council had slowly shut him out before he left the Heavens, Tyrael was almost certain he would have heard about something like this. And these creatures did not sound like members of the Luminarei or any other Heaven's guard.

No, these were something else entirely. Tyrael thought of the birth he had witnessed, the gray tendrils that had snaked around the angel's glowing orb and incorporated themselves into her essence. Somehow these were connected. A chill ran through him. He was afraid they were running out of time.

"I've had the dreams, too," Nahr said, a far-off look in his eyes. "They come to me nearly every night now. I dream of Lorath in templar armor, bloodied and beaten, and when he raises his sword to me, I see nothing but emptiness in him. He does not recognize his own

father. I dream of the deaths of my people—of a town full of the dead. And lately, I've been dreaming of you." He looked around at the others gathered before him. "A figure shrouded in darkness showed me your faces and told me I must help you. What that means, I don't exactly know, but I'm a good judge of character, and I believe what you've told me. Perhaps Lorath got his gift with spells from me. So tell me more about what I can do."

"We believe that a secret Zakarum repository lies somewhere close," Tyrael said. "There may be clues within it to what we seek."

He expected Nahr to look confused, even skeptical. But the large man merely nodded. "There have been rumors for many years about such a place hidden somewhere in these hills. The Zakarum and the knights have searched for it without success, for it supposedly contains an original scroll written by Akarat himself, a lost part of an early version of *The Visions of Akarat* that describes his vision that led to the founding of the Zakarum faith." He suddenly stood and left the room, returning a minute later, delicately holding a crumbling book in his hands. "Last year, my men discovered a hidden room in the remains of a building that had fallen into disrepair and was thought to be cursed. The room contained many Zakarum texts, a few of which I kept. The people say it was used by Master Sayes years ago."

"The Way of Dreams," Cullen said. "Master Sayes was actually a man named Buyard Cholik—a Zakarum priest who fell under the sway of the Hells and founded a new religion that worshipped Kabraxis, a demon that was thought to be able to grant eternal life. Cholik gained great power, some say immortality, before he was killed by a man named Lang, who wielded a holy sword called Stormfury."

"That rings true," Nahr replied. "I wasn't here then, but the people still remember Sayes and his church. Some say he was a healer, others a demon himself. The church he founded burned down several years ago, but an outbuilding remains where Sayes—Cholik, as you say—supposedly lived."

Cullen raised a hand toward the book. "May I?"

Nahr gave it to him, and Cullen took it gently, almost reverently, opening the pages with careful hands. "This is a book of the history of Rakkis's family," he finally said, "and their ties to the Zakarum faith. They were prophets in their own way, bringing the tenets of the faith to the west." He looked up. "There are more of these, you say?"

"I have several," Nahr said. "I am no scholar, but I have read some of them. I kept those that appeared to be of value. There may be others still moldering away in the ruins of that cursed place."

"You must take me there," Cullen said. His eyes were shining brightly like two lanterns in the dark. "Please."

Chapter Fifteen



Cholik's Lair

"I don't like this."

Shanar stood on the street corner with Gynvir, who looked terribly out of place with her broad shoulders, generous breasts, and lots of bare skin. The wizard spoke in a low voice as Jacob surveyed their surroundings, studying the people of Bramwell as they hurried from place to place, heads down and eyes searching the ground. They appeared haunted, their faces drawn and pale, clothes seemingly bleached of color.

But they were watching nevertheless.

A shape moved in a window above the street. A fat man caught staring turned away quickly and hurried around the corner. A young girl, scrawny and covered with sores, watched with huge, moon-shaped eyes from an alley, her face barely visible in the shadows.

The group had come here to the lower eastern edge of the city for supplies while the others went to the remains of Cholik's residence, and Jacob had hoped to speak to the people to learn more about what they had seen and the dreams Nahr had described. He felt a strange kinship with them, as he had begun to dream over the past few nights of his father covered with the bloody carvings of runes, the rage plague turning him into a violent monster, and looming, faceless creatures that reached out to Jacob with black-clawed wings and dragged him down into darkness.

But Jacob's group had been shunned as soon as they had set foot in the streets, and as they approached the butcher's shop, someone had pulled a shade and locked the door. The tavern was shuttered and dark, and the only trade cart was empty and hitched to an ancient, bony mule that stood with its head down, dozing in the cool air, no owner to be seen. This was a city that fed on the movement of goods, and they were in an area that the traders would have frequented. But at this moment, nothing was being sold, and no business was being conducted. The air smelled of smoke and mud and spoiled things left too long outside.

Bramwell is dead.

"We should move on," Jacob said. His back itched. They were exposed out here, easy targets, and although he didn't think the people would go so far as to attack them, he wasn't willing to put their lives on the line to prove his theory.

As if in answer, a voice drifted toward them like the call of a wendigo, echoing between buildings. A few moments later, a woman

tottered around the bend, shuffling on bare, weathered feet, her hair hanging in gray strings across a face that looked utterly mad. Her sunken mouth moved constantly as she babbled and howled, skin run through with blue veins. She kept her hands out, grasping blindly, keeping close to walls or other landmarks that she could touch.

"I-fear-the-dark-pulls-close-it-brings-no-solace-no-peace," the old woman muttered, milky eyes rolling, her voice rising so that the last words turned into a cry of anguish, a sob. "They should know what I see, what I know!"

She stopped abruptly a few feet from Shanar, Gynvir, and Jacob, cocked her head like a dog, and sniffed. Her head swung in their direction, her blind eyes searching.

"You," she said, pointing a long, bony finger at Jacob. "I have a message to give you. You bring the dark, the dreams, the blood and screams. You bring the black birds that sit on our shoulders and pluck out our eyes. The phantoms that snatch our children and pile them up like rotten logs against the doors to freedom! You bring . . . *him*."

Shanar glanced at Jacob. "I don't think she likes you," she said.

The old woman threw her head back and gave a long, gibbering laugh that ended abruptly as another woman hurried around the corner, spying her and rushing over.

"Molly," she said, touching the crone's arm as she glanced quickly at Jacob, "you shouldn't be here. Come away from them; come now . . ."

The old woman shook her head. "They must know," she whispered. "They have seen the black beasts and have felt their touch." She began muttering again under her breath.

"Strangers frighten her," the younger woman said to them as she petted the old woman's sagging flesh. She was well dressed, but dark circles ringed her eyes. "Molly was a follower of the Prophet of the Light, and it touched her mind. When he was killed, she was never the same. She gets out during the day sometimes, when I work in the shop. Not that there are many people to serve anymore."

"We just need some supplies," Jacob said. "We aren't here to bother anyone."

She would not meet his eyes. Instead, she pulled on Molly's arm, but the old woman would not budge. "You shouldn't have come here," the young woman said. "I don't know who you are, but it's not safe. Ever since the damned church and its dark ways, we've been targets for things that are better left alone."

"People are disappearing," Shanar said. "You lost someone."

The woman nodded once. "Eli's wife. Three guardsmen on patrol. My . . . father. My brother. Many others, vanished at night or when they were alone. Just . . . gone. Sometimes people think they have

seen something, some shape moving beyond the light, a whisper perhaps, but then nothing. Whatever they are.” She shook her head. “I won’t speak more of it. Come on, Molly.”

But the old woman pulled away once again, shaking the other’s grip. “They . . . hunt us,” she hissed, the filmy whites of her eyes like two small moons within the wrinkled pockets of her sockets. “I have seen them.” She gestured to her eyes. “These do not matter. I see better without them. Phantoms! They paralyze with a glance, kill with a touch. They take flight like birds and walk on their wings like spiders’ legs. They steal your souls.”

Jacob thought back to the night at the Slaughtered Calf. The thing that had bent over him was a vague shape in his mind, fogged by the mugs of mead he had consumed. But he remembered how it had moved, like an insect skittering across ice, fluttering in some strange way just beyond the edges of his sight. He remembered how it had reached out with a sort of black tendril, touching his skin.

The old woman shuffled closer, peering up blindly at Jacob’s face. “They want you,” she said. “You bring them upon us.” Suddenly, she grabbed his robe and yanked at it, pulling it down enough to expose the puckered wound on his shoulder. One gnarled finger caressed his flesh, then withdrew. “You have been marked,” she said. She turned and screeched out at the empty street in a mad panic, “This one has been marked, and now *he* will come! The destroyer of worlds!”

“You should not talk like this!” The young woman tried to calm her. “They mean no harm—”

“Why shouldn’t I?” the old woman shouted. “Anyone here deserves to know that death is coming for them! Death from the skies, from the phantoms that descend upon us, from the destroyer! Death everywhere! I have seen them, seen them in here”—she pointed to her head—“and they will mark those who shall serve as guideposts, beacons for their soul-stealing brethren and the one who will follow them! We are all doomed!” The tendons stood out in the old woman’s neck, her body straining as she lifted her ragged dress all the way over her head, exposing her wrinkled, sagging flesh and the odd, crescent-shaped scar that marked her chest just above the heart.



Cullen was trembling with excitement. He stood outside a crumbling stone building high above the outskirts of town, built like an ancient fortress along the Sweetwater River. The ruins of the church of the Way of Dreams lay all around them, mostly burned and toppled to the

ground, but huge limestone blocks remained, gleaming white in the sun. A gigantic carving of a serpent's head sat tilted at a strange angle, its beady eyes staring blankly. A few feet away, a single statue still stood, the arms of the prophet severed at the shoulder, the statue's face obscured by bird droppings and white crust from the salty air.

It hadn't been that long since Cholik's evil reign, and yet these ruins appeared to have been here for a century or more. It was likely part of the dark magic that had driven the man to madness and ruin, Kabrax's spells crumbling along with the stone itself. The smaller building, which still remained mostly whole, was apart from the rest, its deep-set window slits black as pitch, brambles growing up its sides and obscuring the foundation.

Cholik lived here. Cullen had read about him in the histories of the west kingdoms written by a scholar who had studied with the king's cousin at Westmarch. Cholik had been obsessive, first with the Zakarum faith and then with the occult, as he began to slip down a black road of corruption, and he very likely had collected an extensive library of rare texts, many of them demonic in nature.

A man like Cholik would have been secretive to the point of madness. He would have protected his greatest treasures. Cullen shivered. What Nahr had found might only be a fraction of what was hiding within these walls—and what was left might be very dangerous indeed.

"The people believe this is a haunted place," Nahr said. "They won't cross the threshold. Even my men avoid it like the plague." He stepped forward and yanked at the heavy wooden planks that had been secured across the entrance, and they dropped free with a clatter. He pushed open the door. Blackness yawned inside. "There is a library on the main floor," he said. "That's where we found the texts. But they're mostly cleared out now."

"Aren't you coming?" Thomas asked.

"I'll wait outside," Nahr said. "I don't like the feel of it. Evil lives in the bones of this place, and I wouldn't stay too long. It gets into you."

"Fair warning," the skull said from the necromancer's pouch. "He's right, but I don't suppose you'll listen. There's magic here, and it's not the friendly kind."

The others looked at one another, but Tyrael strode forward without hesitation, vanishing into the dark, Mikulov close behind. "My eyes, Humbart, if you please," Zayl said, and removed the skull from the pouch. White bone gleamed in his hand as he followed Tyrael into the gloom. Cullen could hear Humbart muttering.

"Come on, then," Cullen said to Thomas, who looked slightly ill. The two of them stepped through the door, Cullen first. His heart raced in his chest. Nothing was going to keep him from this.

The hallway's walls were crumbling, the smell of mildew and rot heady in his nostrils. He blinked, eyes adjusting to the darkness. There were rooms on either side but no sign of Tyrael, Mikulov, or the necromancer.

Cullen suddenly had the overwhelming sense that he was being watched. He took a few more steps, the back of his neck itching. The hairs on his arms stood up. *Something very bad happened here.* He took another step, and a rat the size of a small dog sprang from the room on the left and raced past his feet, nearly tripping him. Thomas let out a cry of disgust and kicked at it, and the creature squealed and disappeared through a hole in the wall.

"Nasty filth," Thomas muttered, as a glow emanated from beyond and Mikulov stepped out into the hall from a room near the end of the home.

"The library is empty," the monk said. Cullen hurried to the end and looked in to find Tyrael and Zayl standing in a dusty room, the necromancer holding up a small flame that sent light dancing across the walls. The shelves that lined the room were bare except for a few tattered remains of parchment.

Cullen's heart sank. They had been close to something—he could feel it. They took the rickety stairs to the second floor. It was dark, the small windows covered with wood. Dust rose up and choked them, and the sound of creaking floorboards nearly made Cullen turn back. He had no doubt that ghosts lived here, waiting in corners and behind closed doors for a victim. Inside what must have been Cholik's bedroom, he found markings on the walls that appeared to be demonic in nature. But the room contained little else except a rotting bed and a table.

They took the stairs back down and explored the rest of the house. Finally, they faced the root-cellar door.

"You first," Thomas said. Cullen shook his head. Zayl took the lead, descending into darkness with his flame aloft, ducking thick cobwebs and rat droppings. Worn, rotting boards creaked and groaned at their steps, but they held.

The cellar was so dark it swallowed the light of the flame. The others walked slowly, shuffling with hands out as if to ward off whatever might lurk there. The floor was made of hard-packed dirt, the walls old stone that bled moisture. Cullen expected something to leap out at them at any moment, something so terrible and vicious they would never make it back out alive. His heart beat so hard it threatened to fly from his chest.

But the cellar did not give up its secrets. It was also empty of anything of value, and eventually, Cullen's hopes sank.

Finally, they took the stairs back to the main hallway. As they

gathered once again, Thomas touched Cullen on the shoulder, as if sensing his disappointment. "Our chances of finding answers here were slim," he said. "So we keep looking, go through the rest of the books Nahr has in his home. Maybe there's something we missed."

Cullen nodded, trying to keep the negativity from his voice. "I felt something," he said. "Some . . . energy. There's a presence here, or an echo of one."

"Aye," the skull said, still sitting in Zayl's gloved hand. "A demon like the one this man conjured leaves a trace like a bad smell. It can worm its way into your heads, so that sooner or later, you'll end up like me."

The others began to file outside. Cullen was the last to move, and as he started toward the door, a thought occurred to him.

The rat. Where had it gone?

He returned to the spot on the wall where the hole was and felt for seams, tapping gently. It sounded hollow. With rising excitement, he knelt and examined the rat hole. It was a little too man-made. He reached in and felt around, waiting for the feel of sharp rodent's teeth clamping down on his flesh.

High up, just about as far as he could get, a latch of some kind stuck out. He gave it a sharp yank, and it let go as a section of the wall moved, revealing the outlines of a door.

Cullen pushed the hidden door open to a black hole. "Come quickly!" he shouted. "I've found something!"

Tyrael was at his side again in an instant, followed by the others. "Light," the archangel commanded, and the necromancer brought his flame forward. The flickering light revealed a small, windowless room built out of stone blocks. Old stains covered the floor and speckled the walls. *Blood*, Cullen thought. But then the thought was washed away as he caught a glimpse of the texts that lined the walls behind a wooden desk.

He stepped forward, but Mikulov caught his arm. "This is the lair of a madman," the monk said. "There may be protections still in place." He crouched at the doorway, studying the floor. For a moment, his fingers played across the stone, and then he pressed down. A square section of the floor sank about half an inch as a scythelike blade attached to an iron rod slashed an arc across the entrance at shoulder height before burying itself in the wooden frame just inches away from Cullen's nose.

He swallowed hard and nodded at the monk, who had regained his feet. Mikulov slipped under the still-quivering blade, his steps light and carefully placed, but no other traps revealed themselves. After a few moments examining every surface, the monk declared it safe.

And, fingers trembling with excitement, Cullen was finally able to

approach the ancient texts and scrolls and examine what he had found.

Chapter Sixteen



The Bone Demon

Tyrael held up a hand, indicating to the others to halt for a moment. The going was hard up here, the ground steep and heavily wooded. They were now somewhere northeast of Bramwell, deep in the mountains and far off any path.

The evening before, the Horadrim had reconvened back at Nahr's home. Jacob, Shanar, and Gynvir had returned in somber moods, relating their accounts of the old madwoman who had recognized Jacob's puckered wound and then shown them her own. *The destroyer of worlds!* the old woman had screeched. Tyrael knew of only one kind of being that went by that name: the Sicarai. If a Sicarai was after them now, they were in trouble and running out of time.

But what about the black-winged creature that had made the mark on Jacob's shoulder? How was it connected to the Heavens, and how were the disappearances of the people of Bramwell involved?

In spite of his concern over the destroyer and the so-called phantoms, as he studied the rough terrain around them, Tyrael thought that his team might be coming closer to its goal. Cholik's hidden chamber had given up its secrets, one by one. They had brought the old texts and parchment filled with notations back to Nahr's place, where Cullen was able to examine them at length. Many of them were demonic in nature. One, in particular, held a marker that moved like a snake when touched; the marker appeared to be made of leather, but Cullen eventually determined it had been woven from human tongues, and the necromancer had destroyed it in the dust outside Nahr's home.

But Cholik's notes proved extremely valuable. Cullen had been able to piece together the location of Tauruk's Port, an abandoned shipping town some distance from Bramwell, built on the ruins of an even older city inhabited by Vizjerei sorcerers and used to summon demons. Cholik had been searching for an extensive cave system that lurked under the mountains and connected to the old ruins, and apparently, he had found it and had loosed Kabraxis there. His notes also made reference to a Zakarum repository at the mouth of another entrance to the caverns, high in the mountains overlooking the gulf—a repository that supposedly contained texts written by Akarat himself.

Nahr had come along as their guide through the treacherous wilderness, but his familiarity with the landscape faltered after they left the immediate area around the city. After several hours hiking through increasingly steep and dangerous terrain, they had reached a

plateau of sorts where the mountain fell away on one side to the gulf.

Thomas and Cullen stood together head-to-head amid a patch of trees, consulting the drawings of the landmarks they had hastily sketched based on the information they had found in the hidden chamber. Their breath fogged the air; a chill breeze had swiftly dropped down from the Hawke's Beak mountain range, bringing heavy clouds and mist that swirled around their feet.

"I think we need to go west," Cullen said. He pointed to where the ground dropped steeply toward the water far below. "If we skirt the edge of this peak, then, as was written here, we will see the shape of the spider in the rock—"

Thomas was shaking his head. "I don't believe we're on the right slope," he said. "Look here . . ." He pointed at the drawings in Cullen's hand. "We should have found the ruins by now, if the texts were correct."

They went on, the conversation growing more heated as Tyrael stepped to the edge of the drop. He stared out over the tops of trees that had grown bent by wind, rain, and snow, their ragged limbs like weary soldiers determined to hold the line against a relentless enemy. An emptiness inside him grew larger by the moment, rapidly swallowing his newfound confidence. Time was running out. They had so much to do, and every single step of his plan had to go perfectly. Tyrael had begun to formulate a way into the Heavens without being seen; that much was easy . . . but what about turning this group of bickering strangers into a team of nephalem warriors strong enough to survive what they would see beyond the gates? What about navigating them safely through the treacherous arms of the Luminarei? Assuming they could even find this place of safekeeping, how could they steal the soulstone out from under an army of angels and return it to the realm of the nephalem?

You cannot possibly survive, a voice said. It sounded much like Deckard Cain. *In this, you are overmatched and alone. You must end it now, before it is too late.*

"We are near a place of power," the necromancer said, coming up next to him. "I feel it."

The skull had remained nestled in its pouch and uncharacteristically silent during this journey. The night before, the group had bedded down in Nahr's workshop and spent an uncomfortable night, with Gynvir muttering about the "demonspawn" necromancer being too close for comfort. At one point, Humbart had threatened to call in the spirits of his long-dead comrades to silence her, and that had nearly led to the skull being cleaved in two by the barbarian's battle axe before Tyrael ended the disagreement like a parent separating two squabbling children.

Zayl had remained several yards behind the others as they hiked up the mountainside, but Tyrael had noticed his strange gray eyes constantly searching their surroundings, his head up and alert. He was no fool, this necromancer. They were lucky he had stayed with them.

“Gynvir does not trust my intentions,” the necromancer said.

“She is a member of the Owl tribe, which once protected Mount Arreat and the Worldstone from invaders from the Dreadlands, before the Bearers came and brought the rage plague to the barbarians,” Tyrael said. “Her tribe was consumed. Only the explosion on the mountain seared the plague from her flesh and saved her from the same fate.” He glanced at the necromancer, who looked out over the vast forest. “One of the Bearers was your kind, twisted by the plague and the demon Maluus into something else, an abomination. He did great damage to Gynvir’s kin.”

Zayl did not change his expression. “Necromancers are not often corrupted,” he said. “But when we are . . .” He shrugged. “The results can be dangerous.” Now he turned to look at Tyrael. “What we find in these mountains will take us down a path that requires teamwork. She will have to work through her anger for us to have any chance to succeed.”

“Let us hope it comes soon enough.”

Zayl nodded. He was silent for a long moment. “Once we find the lair of the nephalem, what then?”

“We turn you into warriors and thieves,” Tyrael said. “We use every skill at our disposal. Trickery and disguise, misdirection, surprise. We cannot beat the Luminarei face-to-face. We must use the angels’ pride against them and get in and out before they realize what is happening.”

“And if they discover us?”

“We die fighting.”

They watched the clouds darken on the horizon and lightning brighten their underbellies in purple bursts of color. Rain was coming, a stippled line that marched relentlessly closer and promised to drench them to the bone.

“What you seek up here is protected by a death spell,” Zayl said. “It is ancient and well-conceived, and it will take great skill to break it.”

Tyrael patted him once on the shoulder. “You should begin soon, then,” he said.



The necromancer led them down the steep incline, and they zigzagged

across the slope to keep their feet and braced themselves against the trunks of trees as they went. Mikulov slipped away and then back again several times, his face growing grim as he spoke in a low voice to Thomas and Cullen. Whatever concerned him, he did not say to the others, and Tyrael did not ask. If it were important enough, the monk would come to him.

The brush thickened in places, making it slow going, and they had to skirt a gigantic rock outcropping that created a sheer cliff at least one hundred feet high, going nearly sideways for what had to be an hour before finding a way down and doubling back. Nahr had grown more hesitant as they went, unfamiliar with the terrain. Noises seemed to echo all around them. Once or twice, Tyrael thought he saw movement beyond the mist, but it was gone before he could turn his head.

By the time they reached the base of the cliff, the air was thick with moisture, and the mist had shrouded the trees. They gathered in a small clearing. Ancient grooves and cracks on the cliff face dripped with water, the cracks forming the shape of a gigantic spider. "The formation from the texts," Cullen said. "This is the place—the ruins should be here."

An animal called in the distance, the sound drifting through the forest like the cry of the damned. The skin on Tyrael's neck prickled, hair on his forearms standing on end. Zayl approached the sheer rock. He knelt and withdrew a short red candle from his pouch, lighting it with straw from a small tinderbox, muttering words of power.

The sky above them began to darken further, and a chill breeze pushed the mist into swirling shapes that danced around their ankles and caused the candle flame to gutter. Zayl held his gloved hand around it and placed the candle firmly in the dirt. He drew a series of designs, connecting them with forking symbols. Then he dripped red liquid from the vial in his pouch and muttered under his breath, waving his hand over the flame.

Another puff of wind came from nowhere, lifting the dirt and spinning it in mini-cyclones before drawing it up into a vague shape. A sound like a whisper rose from a smoky mouth lined with the barest suggestion of teeth.

Gynvir cursed at the sight, her hands on her axe.

"Speak quickly, spellcaster," the conjured demon hissed. *"Before I am finally set free. Your binding spell is almost spent."*

"Break the mountain, X'y'Laq. Bar'qual d'al amentis."

"You do not want to do that," the demon said, a lilt in its voice. *"It is a death spell. You don't know what you will find inside."*

"And conjured by a very powerful mortal, in league with demons," Zayl said. *"I cannot test it myself."*

"It would put me in danger!" the demon whined. *"What if Il'qual'Amoul were to stretch me at the wheel—"*

"We don't have time for games," Zayl said. He made a grabbing motion around the flame, squeezing his fist. The demon squealed in pain.

"Stop . . . I will do as you wish!" X'y'Laq screeched. When Zayl let go, the thing hissed again, whimpering. *"You will pay for that,"* it muttered, after a moment. *"Just wait . . ."*

"Now, X'y'Laq."

"Very well." The demon took a deep breath, sucking the swirling dirt into itself and swelling in size, taking in more and more until its open maw loomed over the necromancer.

And then it exhaled, sending the dirt cloud rushing toward the cliff.

Pebbles caught in the draft bounced off rock, and the ground shuddered, and the wind howled like a banshee. Tyrael stood tall against the storm, squinting into it as the others shielded their eyes, turning away.

A demon exploded from the soil before the cliff, a humanlike shape made of dust and the bones of the dead strung together into limbs that cracked and screamed, its massive shoulders like slabs of white rock below a ghoulish face that leered down at them.

"Break it, X'y'Laq!" Zayl shouted, but X'y'Laq laughed.

"You should have considered the consequences!" it squealed gleefully. *"Il'qual'Amoul will strip the flesh from your bones! You will—"*

With a ground-shuddering growl, the gigantic bone demon reached down with a clawlike hand made of human tibias and skulls for joints and wrapped its fingers around the smoky form of X'y'Laq.

The smaller demon screeched again, struggling against the bones as it was lifted up and away from the candle flame. Its essence stretched longer and longer, thinning as it writhed, X'y'Laq's needlelike teeth trying to bite down without success.

As X'y'Laq screamed one last time and the smoke trail snapped, Zayl muttered something, and his enchanted bone dagger appeared in his hand. The blade glowed brightly as he strode forward and thrust it into the bone demon's abdomen.

The giant roared in pain, and the necromancer twisted the blade into the nest of bones, yanking downward. More bones spilled from inside it like entrails. The demon swiped at Zayl, and the necromancer jumped back, slicing off the tips of two bony appendages. But the bone demon swung its other limb too quickly for Zayl to react. It caught his arm and spun him like a doll, the dagger flying through the air to land twenty feet away.

As Il'qual'Amoul reared up over the prone necromancer and raised a gigantic foot to stomp, a blur of bright energy exploded toward it.

Mikulov thrust his palm outward in a thunderclap of power that shattered the bone demon's leg and stopped its deadly attack. Dry bones flew everywhere, hitting the cliff and bouncing back. Without its leg, Il'qual'Amoul teetered and then fell back into the hole that had opened with its passage, stuck with its head and shoulders sticking out of the ground.

Tyrael drew El'druin from its sheath and swung the blade with all his strength, severing the demon's head.

Almost instantly, the swirling storm subsided as the bones lost the energy that had been animating them and tumbled back into the muddy ground. The wind died, leaving them all panting in the silence.

Zayl regained his feet, reaching out a gloved hand. The bone dagger flew through the air to him, and he returned it safely to his sheath. Although it had seemed to last forever, the entire sequence had lasted only seconds.

The red candle was gone. Where it had stood was now a gaping hole in the ground strewn with human bones, exposing a set of stone steps leading into darkness below the cliff face.



Tyrael led the descent into the gloom.

El'druin glowed brightly against the dark as they picked their way through the remains of Il'qual'Amoul. These bones were ancient, bleached white where the mud hadn't stained them a darker brown, the remnants of those long gone from these woods.

But what they found in the room beneath the cliff was fresh.

The steps ended at an archway cut into the rock. The air was dry and stale belowground, but the smell of rot was heavy. Shanar invoked a spell that sparked the glow from her staff and illuminated the stone floor of the chamber beyond as Tyrael sheathed El'druin; they would face no threat here.

The bodies of the missing people of Bramwell were stacked like cordwood against the far wall. Limbs twisted every which way, entangled around one another; pale, lifeless faces stared blankly as the Horadrim filed slowly into the silent chamber. Commander Nahr gave a low cry and came forward, kneeling in prayer. One of the closest bodies was a young man still clad in the armor of the city guard. Nahr reached out to touch the corpse's hand. "Lorath's good friend Robert," he said. "They grew up together in Westmarch. Robert came to Bramwell with his father last year to help fortify the wall patrols and left a young wife behind. He had planned to return this month."

Tyrael watched the commander stand up and turn away. He wanted to do something but could not; these people were long past saving.

He looked around. The space was perhaps one hundred feet across and appeared to be naturally formed. It was also mostly empty. Tyrael's heart sank. He felt for the chalice, nestled against his breast. The numb feeling spread through his limbs, encased him in its ironlike grip. His body ached to stare into Chalad'ar's swirling depths again, as he had the night before when the others slept. The chalice gave him a kind of peace he could not find among the living. He craved the expansion of his mind, needed the euphoria that washed over him as he slipped between the strands of light . . .

"The breaking of the mountain will bring other things our way," Mikulov said, cutting through Tyrael's trance. The monk's voice was low enough for the others not to hear. "We may not have much time before we are discovered."

Tyrael nodded. This was no time to drift off in some kind of fog. But they had found nothing but death here: no nephalem ruins, no further clues. "The texts were wrong," he said.

"There is one place we haven't looked," the monk said. He nodded to the gruesome pile of bodies.

No. The smell of death was overpowering; the unnaturally dry air belowground and the sealed state of the cavern had preserved them to some extent, but Tyrael could see the slime on their skin, the puffy flesh, and the rot that had begun in earnest in those below the first layer.

As he stood there, a draft touched his face. The bodies were piled high enough to conceal another passageway.



Overcome with grief, Nahr nevertheless set his jaw and threw himself in with the others as they moved the bodies one at a time, gently at first, then faster, gripping slippery, cold limbs and swinging them to the side as quickly as they could, their resolve hardening their stomachs and minds to what must be done.

As they reached the worst of the decaying corpses, more cold air wafted out, and another opening was uncovered. It was low enough so that Tyrael would have to duck to enter it, but it appeared to be man-made.

"More light," Tyrael said, as the last corpse was set aside, and Shanar brought her staff closer, illuminating the arched doorway. They entered a second room carved from the rock. Mages had done

this, by the look of the work, perhaps Vizjerei, Tyrael thought, or older.

The walls were covered with carvings: a giant made of the mountains themselves, a beast with many heads, a gigantic dragon coiled among the stars, a man exploding into rays of pure light and energy. Below the largest of them was a flat slab of rock like an altar, and upon it sat tattered remains of cloth, jewels, and scrolls.

This was no repository, Tyrael thought. And it was old, far older than the Zakarum Church. Thomas and Cullen began to examine the objects on the slab, talking excitedly as they placed items gently in their rucksacks. The scrolls had been remarkably preserved in the dry, cool air, but they were delicate.

Cullen now held aloft a small, strangely shaped dagger with a flat, broad blade. The dagger had a jeweled hilt and a squared-off end rather than a point. "I've never seen such a weapon," he said. He turned. "Mikulov, have you ever encountered in your travels—"

But the monk was not there.

Chapter Seventeen



The Attack

Mikulov watched the circle of hooded men from his position in the trees.

He had left the underground cavern when the wind had carried a message from Ytar to him, alerting him to danger. The bone demon had only been the beginning. The balance in the elements had been upset by its presence, and that would surely bring more fiends, drawn like moths to a flame. The others needed time to explore what was underneath the ruins, and he would give it to them.

He expected trouble. But even the monk was surprised by what he found.

In a smaller clearing below the cliff, the men were chanting softly. They wore cloaks adorned with runes and carried long staves that they leaned on for support. Their hoods covered their faces completely.

Spikes protruded from their bodies in a gruesome display of religious fervor, and behind them lurked monstrous berserkers, their greenish skin and rippling muscles seeming to glow in the shadows cast by the trees and the clouds that loomed overhead.

A berserker threw its masked head back and roared at the sky, then took a spike and hammered it through a cloaked man's neck.

There was very little blood. The robed figure barely seemed to react at first. But the chanting grew louder as the figure began to convulse, shuddering, a red light emanating from beneath his feet. The robes tore as his body swelled and rippled, wounds opening like hungry mouths, his flesh transforming, entrails protruding from a wet hole in his abdomen, bones red with blood sticking out from muscle and sinew.

A dark vessel. An awakening. This was what the cultists had been trying to accomplish back in Tristram. The demon hovered several feet off the ground, ropes of intestines hanging over the shattered remains of its legs, a sickly blood-red glow washing the clearing like the fires of Hell.

Another berserker hammered home a spike in a second victim, then a third. The men began to transform as the chanting reached a fever pitch. Mikulov considered an attack, but these were powerful demons, and it would be risky to confront them alone. And there was movement from below the clearing; it was impossible to tell how many other creatures might be approaching.

Better to warn the others and get out now, before it was too late.

Thunder crashed overhead, and rain began to fall in earnest as the monk quickly made his way back up the slope. The ground, covered in leaves and needles, grew slippery and treacherous, but Mikulov did not falter. He could hear the gods in the drops of rain pattering all around him, feel them in the growing buzz of energy in the air, the smell of the wet bark and the leaves on the ground. They were warning him. All things eventually returned to their maker, but the death wielders that were coming were not a natural part of this world. They were a violation of order and light, and that made the gods angry.

The image from his vision of several nights before returned to him—Tyrael transforming into a figure in dark robes with no face. What did it mean? He knew he must meditate on this, but now he would return to the cliff and gather the others quickly, and they would decide together whether to stand here and fight or make their retreat to wait for a better time.

That was when something huge and black moved in the forest at the edge of his sight.



The Horadrim and Nahr emerged from the cavern opening and into the dull gray light of the breaking storm, weapons ready. The sky had turned dark, clouds were close over their heads, and the rain lashed at their faces and drenched their clothes in moments.

Tyrael was at the front, the others close behind. He blinked into the rain, trying to clear his eyes as he looked around the clearing for danger. What had come over him inside the cavern? He couldn't lose sight of the importance of human life; protecting Sanctuary and its inhabitants needed to remain a priority, along with the Heavens. The Horadrim were the key to everything. It was up to him to make sure that they escaped this place alive and accomplished their mission.

Do not fail in this, he told himself. Deckard and Leah perished to save Sanctuary, in service to the light. Do not forsake them or forget your purpose.

A figure emerged through the gloom. Tyrael drew El'druin before he recognized the monk's lithe form.

"The creatures that have taken the people of Bramwell are here," Mikulov said. "I have seen one moving through the trees and heard others. But they move quickly and are not easily tracked."

"Phantoms," Nahr whispered. His face was pale. His own sword was a beautifully forged weapon with the marks of the Zakarum faith

engraved along its long, razor-sharp blade. "I will taste their blood before the end of this!"

Mikulov pointed to where the forest dropped off. "There are others. Dark vessels and berserkers and more down among the trees."

As if in answer, a tremendous crash shook the ground as a huge berserker tore through the tree line and entered the clearing. This one was larger than any Tyrael had ever seen.

Another emerged behind it, then another, each as large as the first. The lead berserker roared and smashed its maul into the ground with vicious force, a teeth-jarring impact that drew other creatures into the dim light and lashing rain. Dark vessels hovered behind them, entrails snaking below their severed torsos.

Several spiderlike beasts as large as a man slipped on long, hairy legs through the ground cover, their fangs clicking, multifaceted eyes reflecting the glow from El'druin as they paused, their front legs up and feeling the air. On the other side of the clearing, grotesquely fat horrors waddled forward, seemingly made out of human skin sewn together, wrists ending in bloody, oozing stumps. Hellions slunk into the light around them, weaving between their legs and snarling at the Horadrim, who had tightened ranks near the temple's entrance.

Tyrael watched the gathering creatures with growing horror. It made no sense. Beasts such as these did not often travel together. And they seemed to be acting with some coordination, almost as if they had been herded to this spot.

How had they found this place, and what was their purpose?

He didn't have any more time to ponder the question. The lead berserker charged forward, snarling, maul raised and ready to crush Gynvir's skull. The barbarian sidestepped neatly and swung her battle axe with one hand, burying it in the beast's shoulder. The berserker howled and yanked free, black blood spurting across Gynvir's chest as she pivoted to swing again, meeting the beast's maul with her axe, sparks showering through the rain.

"Keep your distance!" Jacob shouted. The fat undead had waddled forward, surprisingly fast for their bulk. Zayl muttered into the wind, and a nest of bones rose up from where they had been scattered across the steps. A gesture turned them into hurtling spears that impaled two of the monstrous creatures in multiple places. They started shuddering uncontrollably, then burst apart, spreading a shower of corpse worms that wriggled toward Jacob's boots. He stomped at them, slicing and hacking at their sightless heads with his sword as green slime joined the rainwater in a slick, oozing sheet of muck.

Across the clearing, the spiders advanced on scuttling legs, hissing, venom dripping to the ground and sizzling like acid. Tyrael sliced the front limbs off one that had reared back to strike, leaving it mewling

in pain and waving stumps that sprayed sticky fluid. He stepped back, avoiding the mess, and thrust El'druin into its broad abdomen, spilling guts onto the forest floor.

More hideous creatures left the cover of the woods. Tyrael's heart sank at the sight; this was a far more dangerous skirmish than Tristram. But the Horadrim fought back hard. Shanar was throwing bolts of purple energy that burned the flesh from the bones of the closest hellions, and the monk was protecting the flanks of Thomas and Cullen, who were fighting off another pack of giant spiders and trying to avoid their deadly venom while being attacked from behind by a berserker. Nahr fought bravely with his sword, slicing hellions in half with mighty blows.

Tyrael felt a strange surge of pride for them. They were beginning to work together. Perhaps they had a chance after all.

Something flitted among the trees, moving quickly, a dark shape that had vanished before Tyrael could get his bearings. He turned and saw another hovering like a gigantic bat above the cliff face, and that too disappeared. More black shapes moved at the edges of his sight, and each time he whirled to face them, they were gone.

"Show yourselves!" Nahr screamed, his voice full of anguish. The big man turned quickly, searching for something else to strike. The heavy rain made it even harder to track movement, causing confusion and panic; he almost sliced Tyrael's arm as he spun with his bloody sword, then stumbled to his knees in the muck.

As the archangel turned back toward the approaching dark vessels, a flash lit up the clearing, searing the trunks of trees into vivid relief and washing everything to a white, blank emptiness that lingered far too long. Tyrael threw his arm up to shield his face, blinking into the heavy rain to clear his sight.

Spots floated before his eyes.

A portal had opened beyond the tree line.

A Sicarai emerged from the trees. The angelic destroyer scanned the clearing and then charged at Tyrael, weapon ready to deliver a deadly strike.

Chapter Eighteen



The Sicarai

The destroyer's huge, golden, double-bladed sword sang as the mighty angel flew forward through the clearing. The Sicarai's aura glowed red like fine droplets of blood, wings like writhing tongues of energy that snapped through the rain like bolts of lightning. His armor-covered, ethereal body was gigantic and crackling with power. And he was relentlessly focused on his target, zeroing in with singular precision.

Had Imperius sent a destroyer after Tyrael, with no regard for the implications for Sanctuary, a world that had never encountered a thing like this? Would the Council have chosen to look the other way and allow it to happen?

If he could not stop the Sicarai, they would surely all be slaughtered like cattle and lost forever in this forsaken place in the mountains, and their mission would end before it had even truly begun.

Tyrael knew most of the Sicarai well. He had trained many of them himself as the archangel of Justice. But this one was a stranger to him, and he didn't like it. He didn't know any particular quirks or tendencies he might have, any weaknesses to exploit. The Sicarai were nearly unbeatable fighters, and without some kind of advantage, the battle was already lost.

There was a time when I would stand up to a warrior like this and teach him a lesson, he thought. But I am mortal now. My flesh is no match for such a thing.

Yet Tyrael was still skilled with his sword, and he had his wits to use as a weapon.

Tyrael scanned the clearing. As he glanced behind him, he saw one of the black creatures scuttling up the sheer cliff face like a spider, its wings acting like extra legs, before it launched itself into the rain and soared overhead. A fresh chill fell over him; the creature was an abomination of the light, a faceless horror that seemed to have come from nowhere, and yet there was something familiar about it. More of them flitted beyond the clearing, slipped through the shadows of the trees. But they kept their distance and did not attack, and Tyrael wondered with a sinking feeling whether they were allowing the Sicarai space to do his work.

Shanar struck at the destroyer with arcs of bright energy, but the purple lashes fell across his armor with little or no effect. The Sicarai's wings snapped and writhed as he bore down on Tyrael. Gynvir stepped into his path and was tossed aside like a rag doll by a single,

mighty blow, the barbarian flying halfway across the clearing and landing with a heavy, lifeless thud in the muck.

Shanar cried out and rushed to her friend's aid, kneeling at her side and keeping the hellions at bay with flashes of energy. Tyrael lost sight of them both as more creatures converged on their location, and then the Sicarai was upon him.

The warrior swung his sword in a strike meant to take his head from his shoulders. Tyrael raised El'druin to fend off the blow, and the two weapons clashed with a mighty explosion of light. The impact nearly shattered Tyrael, causing his muscles to clench and shudder, his arms feeling as if they would be yanked from their sockets. He stumbled sideways, somehow keeping his feet underneath him, but the Sicarai swung again at an angle meant to get under his defenses and break his sword in half.

El'druin held, though, the weapon glowing fiercely as Tyrael parried the blow with a defensive move that directed the Sicarai's sword to glance harmlessly off his own. But the shuddering impact nearly took El'druin from his hands. The destroyer's speed and strength were astonishing. Already the Sicarai had readied himself for another blow. Tyrael managed to duck away, countering with a quick slash that did not come close to landing. *I cannot defeat him this way.* He needed time to think.

Rain fell even harder than before, the ground becoming slick and soft. Tyrael glanced quickly to his right, searching for an answer. One of the grotesques was waddling closer, its patchwork skin crawling with insects and parasites, belly bulging and rolling as the corpse worms squirmed inside. Tyrael sliced a wide wound across the creature's abdomen before stepping lightly clear. It shuddered, gave a wet choking sound, and then exploded, sending fluid and worms flying.

The gore splattered the Sicarai across the chest. More worms writhed in the mud, fixed themselves to the destroyer's armor, wriggled across his helmet. They soaked up his energy like sponges, growing larger. The Sicarai wiped them off, but the momentary distraction had worked enough to slow him down.

The dark vessels had advanced across the clearing, their horned heads jerking and bobbing, clawlike limbs shivering uncontrollably, entrails dragging in the mud. Tyrael slipped behind them, gaining another precious moment. The Sicarai was about brute force, seeking to overpower through momentum and intimidation. But swordplay was also about defense, quickness, and skill. He had to hope he had enough of those to find a way to survive in time for the others to join him. Their only chance was to fight as one.

With a single, vicious slash, the destroyer cut the closest dark vessel

in half. The remaining pieces quivered violently, emitting a blood-red light as the demon that had inhabited its shell was released, howling, into the wind. Tyrael noticed more of the dark-winged phantoms in the trees as several hellions tried to slink away, cutting the beasts off and pushing them back. Another thought occurred to him: could the phantoms have herded this pack of demons to the clearing in the first place? If so, that implied a cunning and sinister purpose that he couldn't yet grasp.

His focus returned to the Sicarai as the warrior charged him once again over the twitching remains of the dark vessel. Tyrael parried and kept enough distance to avoid a killing blow, keeping his arm motions quick and light to deflect the destroyer's sword. But he was tiring, and the Sicarai was relentless, driving forward with his weapon again and again. Tyrael dodged each blow, using the creatures in the clearing as shields and lunging at the merest glimpse of an opening, eventually scoring a strike with El'druin that clashed across the destroyer's armor with a flash of sparks, drawing a growl of rage but doing little damage.

He looked across the clearing at the others. Mikulov darted forward, lashing out with his fists and landing a blow that released a powerful concussion of energy. But the Sicarai barely paused long enough to swipe at the monk, the way a man might swat a buzzing insect.

Mikulov danced away unharmed. Thomas and Cullen had fought off a giant arachnid and called out to the necromancer, who had impaled a berserker through the neck. Zayl muttered into the wind, raising a thicket of bones that fell around the Sicarai and quickly wove themselves into walls, more of them piling on until the destroyer was lost from sight behind them. A moment later, a massive blow from his sword shattered the bones, and they fell uselessly to the ground.

Tyrael was beginning to lose hope. But it was Gynvir who finally turned the tide in their favor.



Against all odds, the barbarian had regained her feet. An aura enclosed her, glowing softly in the rain as she raced toward where the Sicarai and Tyrael were battling, infused with a righteous fury that lifted her up and propelled her ahead. The destroyer, focused on his target, did not sense her approach as she raised her battle axe and brought it down with a shout of triumph.

The axe blade, illuminated in the dim light, sliced cleanly through

three light strands of the Sicarai's wing, severing them at the shoulder.

The destroyer screamed, an inhuman sound full of pain and surprise. He whirled toward Gynvir, leaving a moment for Tyrael to strike.

The archangel lunged, directing El'druin at a weak point in the joint of armor on the Sicarai's right arm. The sword's blade bit down, not through flesh and blood but through the light energy that made up the angel's being. The destroyer roared again as El'druin flared brightly, and the Sicarai dropped his weapon in the muck. Tyrael's hand burned with fire, but he held on to his sword as he withdrew, keeping enough distance to avoid being struck by the enraged warrior, who spun around, searching for the enemy that had suddenly attacked him from all sides. Although he had lost his weapon, he was still a very dangerous foe.

Red-tinged light spewed through the Sicarai's armor like blood as Jacob darted in quickly and snatched the destroyer's sword from the ground.

Tyrael could see Jacob grit his teeth, but he held on to the weapon, standing up straight and brandishing it in the air. Water sizzled on the hot blade.

"Come for me!" Jacob shouted, cords standing out in his neck. He looked around wildly, searching for the phantoms that dipped and flitted through the rain. Smoke was rising from his flesh, his hair beginning to stand on end. But he held strong. "*Come on*, if you dare!"

The Sicarai roared again, then slipped backward and away into the trees as the other beasts that remained standing also began to retreat. A sound like a moan echoed across the cliff face and the valley below as the black-winged phantoms withdrew, fading into the steel-gray clouds above their heads as if they had never existed at all.

Spent, his muscles trembling and near collapse, Tyrael looked down in the muck at his feet. The severed strands of the Sicarai's wing had lost their light, and the thin gray threads woven through them appeared clearly now, standing out in relief like veins, before the strands turned black, fusing into glass that shattered into tiny pieces and disappeared.

Chapter Nineteen



The Hallowed Destroyer

“Are you in pain?”

Jacob’s jaw was set in a hard line, and a sheen of sweat had broken out on his face, which was the color of old parchment. But his eyes were strong, and his gaze met Tyrael’s with a steady calm that the archangel hadn’t seen before.

“I’ve had worse,” Jacob said. “I’ll live.”

The healer from Bramwell, a woman named Idalki, had just finished wrapping Jacob’s hands in salve-soaked bandages made of the sap of an okris plant and spider’s silk. She had chanted something softly over the wounds, but whether it had helped or not, Tyrael couldn’t tell. Jacob’s hands had blistered badly, and the skin was sloughing off in red strips. The necromancer had offered to try a healing spell, but Gynvir wouldn’t let him near Jacob.

No human was meant to hold a Sicarai’s sword, Tyrael thought. And yet in spite of the agony it must have caused him, Jacob had brandished it before an angelic destroyer, an act of courage that had quite possibly saved them all.

“Commander Nahr is waiting for you,” Zayl said. The necromancer stood in the doorway of the modest home, hands clasped at his waist. Tyrael held his gaze for a moment, and Zayl nodded slightly. *It is done.*

“I felt it,” Jacob said, to no one in particular. “The sword, flowing through me . . . I felt alive again.”

Tyrael rested a hand on Jacob’s shoulder, then rose from his kneeling position. There was hope yet for him to become the leader Tyrael believed he could be, hope for their mission to succeed.

“I will be back shortly,” he said. “Try to rest.”



The fire was roaring in the workshop as Nahr worked the bellows and manipulated his tools and the object before him with skill and great speed. Sparks flew; energy coiled and released. Red and orange light flickered across the faces of Thomas and Cullen, who had gathered around a table near the door, poring over the artifacts Cullen had brought back with him from the hidden temple.

Cullen looked up when Tyrael entered, his face shining in the heat and flushed with excitement. “This is an original scroll, written in

Akarat's own hand!" he said.

"The crusaders would be very interested in this, indeed," Tyrael said. "I have met several, and their goal is to redeem the Zakarum. An original scroll written by Akarat would be one of their most prized possessions."

"It describes his vision that led to the founding of the Zakarum faith," Cullen continued, "and it is much as Deckard Cain had suspected. From reading this, I am certain that the vision he received was in fact a cosmic echo of Uldyssian's sacrifice and not a message from an angel. But there's more." He picked up a newer text. "Based on the writings contained in this volume, I believe these artifacts were placed in the cavern by Korsikk for safekeeping and then lost when he was taken by the barbarians."

"The son of Rakkis?" Tyrael took the book from Cullen's hands as Nahr's hammering filled the air. The book was dense with scrawled handwriting, notes scattered across the page. He'd had some experience lately compiling the lore Cain and Leah had left behind, but this was far more difficult to piece together. He didn't know how Cullen was able to decipher it all.

Cullen nodded. "According to Korsikk's journal, his father was obsessed with a search for an early lair of the nephalem, the supposedly hidden city, and Korsikk joined in the pursuit," he said. "Korsikk discovered the location we found in the mountains, which he believed was originally used as a shielded outpost—a place for the nephalem to hide when they were in danger. Korsikk had a Vizjerei sorcerer trap the bone demon to guard it, intending to return. He thought these outposts existed all over Sanctuary. But he believed the nephalem's city and base of operations was constructed by an ancient nephalem called Daedessa and located to the west. It was near there where Westmarch was built, and where they put Rakkis upon his death."

"The lost tomb of Rakkis."

"That's right." Cullen nodded, glancing at Thomas. His excitement was palpable. "We believe the city may be some distance away from the outer walls of Westmarch, but a tunnel leading to it lies directly below Westmarch itself. The entrance to the tunnel is quite possibly under the Church of the Holy Order. There are hand-drawn maps here. But it will be protected by a magic infused many centuries ago, and only a true nephalem will have the key to opening the door."

"If you travel to Westmarch, you'll be entering a hornet's nest," Nahr said. He had been listening as they spoke, the heat from the fire making him glisten. "The templar control the Church of the Holy Order, but the knights won't stand idle much longer. The king will demand a cleansing. The people of that city have no idea what danger

they're in."

"We leave tomorrow," Tyrael said. "Commander Nahr, you could be an asset to us."

Nahr shook his head. "I cannot leave," he said. "My duty lies here in Bramwell until General Torion calls for me to lead the Knights of Westmarch once again. But I can send word with you, so that the knights know you can be trusted." He turned back to his table for a moment, wiped his hands, and returned with something wrapped in heavy cloth. Nahr moved slowly, as if whatever he had been working on had taken a terrible toll on him.

"It is done, as you asked," he said. "A mortal with tremendous skill may be able to wield it, although it will take great strength, even with my adjustments."

Tyrael took the bundle. It was warm. He could feel the sharp, deadly edges of the weapon under the cloth that cradled it. He unwrapped enough to see the handle of the Hallowed Destroyer, the Sicarai's sword. Nahr had bound it in wire and leather that he had branded with a seal, and he had done something to the blade that cooled its power to make it possible to wield. But the sword still thrummed with energy.

"You have done well," Tyrael said. "We thank you, Commander, for everything."

"Show this brand to my son in Westmarch," Nahr said, pointing at the seal. "It is the mark of the house of Nahr, and he will know it is my work and that you have my blessing." For a moment, a look of pain came into Nahr's eyes. His face seemed haggard, his cheeks sunken and gray. "Many people have died," he said. "Whatever you must do to stop this . . . it is not fast enough."

And then Nahr turned and left the workshop, hobbling like an old man, his broad shoulders bent as if he carried a heavy burden.



Tyrael left Cullen and Thomas arguing over the details of the journal and the artifacts they had found, and slipped into the twilight. Nahr was nowhere to be seen, and he felt a twinge of guilt for what he had asked of the man. Reshaping an angelic blade took tremendous skill and energy and could be extremely dangerous.

But if he was right, the results would be worth the sacrifice.

The darkness was deeper than before, and the cold air from the gulf made him draw his robes closer around him. The weapon Nahr had reformed was still warm in Tyrael's grasp. He had asked the

commander to make these alterations for Jacob's sake; it would become a focal point for him, a way to harness his inner strength. But the challenges that lay ahead would take more to overcome than this. They were closer to finding the nephalem stronghold than ever, but what then? Once they reached the lost city, the true test would begin. They would have to face the Heavens themselves, eight mortals against an army of angels.

If they got that far. None of them had spoken much about what had happened on the mountain. But Tyrael knew Imperius and the Sicarai would not stop. The destroyer would be back and would not be taken by surprise again. The real question, Tyrael thought as he made his way to a quiet spot behind the shop, was how the Sicarai and the demon horde had found them in the first place. Had they been tracked ever since they left Tristram? Were the so-called phantoms behind it? And how were they connected to the stone?

He thought about Jacob's puckered wound from the dark-winged creature's touch. *He has been marked . . .*

A breeze rustled through the trees that lined the edges of Nahr's property. Beyond lay the deeper forest that rose into the mountains, and beyond that lay Westmarch, several days' hard travel to the west. Anything could be hidden in that forest. With slightly trembling fingers, Tyrael laid the wrapped weapon at his feet and removed Chalad'ar from the interior pocket of his robes. He was out of view of anyone who might emerge from the shop or Nahr's home, away from the others, and there was time later to sleep. A strange and yet familiar desire stirred within him. The chalice would offer him satisfaction and understanding, a way to relieve the burden that had been placed on his shoulders.

But when he peered into Chalad'ar's depths, that relief did not come. Instead, a wave of despair washed over him, more powerful than any he'd experienced before. The web of light strands encased him, running through his flesh and bringing with them the truth of what they faced; he saw clearly the end of their lives, one by one, as they were overcome with terror and the ache of violence and loss. Anger turned itself inward, and he saw his own weaknesses, his own failings laid bare. He was neither angel nor man, but he had all the trappings of both—pride and recklessness, lust and sorrow, and the frailty that came with a beating heart. Love was a fatal flaw, caring for others a handicap that would lead to his own end.

He saw Deckard Cain dying on the rough floorboards of his home in Tristram, reaching out for solace and finding none; Leah consumed by the Prime Evil, her body twisting and tearing to pieces as she shrieked in agony. He saw Commander Nahr drained and lifeless on the ground; he saw Jacob roasted alive, the flesh boiling from his bones.

He saw Cullen's headless body, quivering before its collapse in a lake of blood.

The worst of it was the understanding that the void was waiting for them all in the end and that there was nothing but emptiness and oblivion after their mortal shells had fallen to dust.

Tyrael screamed without sound, his body convulsing, the agony going on endlessly as time ceased to exist. Dimly, he was aware of another presence that watched him with clinical detachment, seeming to decide the next move to make.



Sometime later, he came to his senses with a start. He was in the woods in full dark, the trees looming like faceless giants all around him, faint moonlight filtering down through heavy branches. The frigid air prickled his skin.

Tyrael's body ached with every breath. He clutched the chalice in both hands, his fingers cramped and his shoulders like blocks of ice. He looked around, disoriented. How long had he been gone? He remembered nothing, except that presence watching him through Chalad'ar.

Something moved in the darkness nearby.

He returned the chalice to his robes and put a hand on the hilt of his sword. The barest whisper came to him through the trees, the sound of a branch sliding past a body in motion. He turned, saw a dark shape slip past him and disappear.

Phantoms? He waited, quieting his own breathing, motionless, but nothing else happened. The moonlight grew stronger and he could see the surrounding forest and the path that he must have broken coming up from below. Perhaps he had been wrong and had seen things that were not there, a lingering effect of the chalice. The cold eased slightly as he made his way back down. Soon he could see the back of Nahr's workshop, the bundle that contained the Sicarai's sword still lying where he had left it.

As he emerged from the forest and picked the bundle up, Mikulov stepped from the shadows.

"You should not be out alone," the monk said. "Anyone can disappear in woods such as these." He studied Tyrael's face for a moment. "You are troubled. There is a great struggle within you, and you seek answers. But you will not find them out here."

Something fiercely protective came over Tyrael. Did the monk know about the chalice? What had he witnessed in the woods tonight?

Had it been Mikulov that Tyrael had seen moving in the shadows of the trees? “You should not be so quick to judge,” he replied. “You know nothing about what I face.”

“I do not judge,” the monk said. “I do not pretend to understand what it means to go from angel to mortal or the burden of deciding what is right for the future of Sanctuary and the Heavens. But whatever choices you make must be yours alone, if you seek the truth. The gods have shown me this.”

“Your gods,” Tyrael said. “Not mine.”

Mikulov simply nodded. “Perhaps we call them different things,” he said. “But the advice is the same. I believe your heart is pure, your intentions honorable. I would not be here if I did not. But there are dangerous forces at work that threaten us all, and they will use any means necessary to disrupt our plans. Some we might recognize. Others . . .” He shrugged. “We may not see until it is too late.”

Tyrael kept his hands steady, but inside his rage was boiling to the surface. The monk should not have been spying on him tonight, and his concerns were misplaced. Chalad’ar simply showed him what already existed in a way that helped him understand what must be done. That was its purpose, to steel him against the difficult choices he must make as a leader.

You may lose some of those you care about in order to save millions. It was the way of the world, and nothing he could do would change that.

“We leave for Westmarch in the morning,” Tyrael said. “I do not believe the destroyer could heal so soon, but it is only a matter of time, and Imperius may send others instead. Keep watch until I send someone to relieve you.”

He did not wait for the monk to respond, slipping by him and around the workshop toward Nahr’s home, his heart hardening against all doubt. Things would proceed as planned. Gynvir had tapped into her nephalem powers for the first time, and the others could also do so. He would present the Sicarai’s sword to Jacob tonight, and they would leave Bramwell at the break of dawn and push hard to reach Westmarch before their enemies could gather against them once again.

What mattered now was locating the lost nephalem stronghold and preparing for their invasion of the Silver City. Above all, Imperius and the Angiris Council must not know they were coming.



Mikulov watched the archangel go. His heart was heavy, his thoughts conflicted. He had seen Tyrael enter the woods as if in a trance, carrying an object of great beauty and power with him, but the monk did not know its purpose. Judging by the look of it, the object had come from the Heavens and not Sanctuary. And yet he sensed a terrible danger emanating from it. The conflict between the two worlds boiled within the archangel, and Mikulov knew that it could very well mean their doom.

Hear me, he said silently to the gods. Help me discover the path to light and peace.

Mikulov closed his eyes. He felt the air caress his face, heard the murmur of the pine boughs in the forest, tasted salt on his tongue. And then all fell silent. He could sense the gods trying to communicate, but something held them back, a barrier of some kind that deadened sound, turned light to darkness, turned fire to ice, and brought eternal sleep.

The monk opened his eyes, searching for the source. His mind took flight, drifting through visions. The moon faded from the sky; the trees disappeared into a black emptiness that ate the world and left him floating alone and untethered, his soul separating from his physical form. He drifted up above himself, feeling the wind lift him higher as the commander's property stretched below, the sound of a moan coming from the figures gathered like statues around the fallen body lying crumpled on the ground: his own lifeless form. He saw the phantoms that finally took him away on silent black wings into the night as a plague of angels descended upon the world, carrying death with them.

Chapter Twenty



The High Heavens

The Sicarai stood at attention, his bearing betraying little of the agony that must have consumed him. The destroyer's arm hung uselessly at his side, and his wing had been partially severed near the shoulder. Pride and training would not allow the fierce warrior to show any pain, but Balzael could tell his wounds would take time to heal.

Balzael had already listened to the Sicarai's account of the battle. Somehow Tyrael's group had managed to find an ancient nephalem location that had been concealed for millennia from the Heavens and the Hells. What was worse, the scouts had told the Sicarai the group was searching for a larger, secret nephalem stronghold for a purpose that remained unclear.

How could a small band of ragged humans have stood strong against an army of demons and an angelic destroyer, not only holding their own but actually causing such damage? And what was their ultimate purpose—to come after the Black Soulstone?

They couldn't possibly think they could succeed. He looked at the Sicarai's wing. *A barbarian female has done this with an axe.* No human weapon should have been able to penetrate the energy contained in an angel's wings; even the slightest contact should have burned her to ash.

It amazed Balzael, and he wondered what it meant. A single nephalem warrior had managed to turn back the Prime Evil from the Crystal Arch where the Luminarei had failed, but Balzael had always assumed that had been a miracle brought by a human who had transcended the race itself and become greater than the mixed blood that pumped beneath all their skins. Humans were dangerous under certain circumstances, like a cornered animal, nothing more than that.

But now he must adjust his thinking. Tyrael had been cleverer than he had realized, assembling his team of new Horadrim. He was doing the same thing he had done centuries ago. These humans would require a more aggressive and thought-out approach.

"You have failed me," Balzael said. "And you have lost your weapon. A Sicarai never drops his sword. The Guardian will not suffer this lightly."

"I am sorry, my lord," the Sicarai said. His voice was still deep and strong, with no hint of the pain that he must be experiencing. "I will not allow this to happen again."

"Of course not." Balzael tried to keep his rage from boiling over. The destroyer had been taken by surprise this time; it was the only

explanation. He thought about unleashing the Luminarei in all its fury right now. But he could not order it alone, and the Council was not yet ready to agree, in spite of all Balzael had done. Imperius would never allow the army to descend upon the land of men until the final decision had been made on Sanctuary's fate.

Not until the stone had been given time to do its work.

No, the Sicarai and their friends on the ground were enough. There were parts of this disaster that he could use, if he thought things through carefully. Tyrael's team was seeking something important. They had already proved more resourceful than Balzael's allies in Sanctuary.

He must learn more about the nephalem stronghold and consult the Guardian about it. Perhaps there was something they could use—and perhaps the humans would lead him right to the stronghold's location, if he showed patience and cunning.

Balzael had gone in too blindly this time, seemingly assured of an easy victory. He needed weaknesses to exploit; humans cared far too much for one another, and that meant they were vulnerable. First, he had to know more about them, and then he needed to understand the alliances among them so he could tear them apart.

Balzael studied the warrior still standing at attention. This was his very best. And now he held a grudge.

"Tell me again exactly what they were doing on that mountain," Balzael said. "Leave nothing out—I want to know every step, every breath they took, everything they removed from the nephalem chamber. And then you will heal your wounds and prepare to face them again, and this time, you will not fail."

For a moment, the Sicarai's power flared, his anger shining through before discipline and training took over. "They will regret what they have done; I promise you."

Balzael nodded. He had much to do; Imperius was waiting, and there were others who also needed to be updated. One, in particular, who would not be pleased. But Balzael was still confident that no humans, regardless of their skills, could possibly stand against them for long. And just in case Tyrael proved to be even more resourceful than Balzael had anticipated, there were other ways to attack him, ways that he would not see coming.

Balzael readied himself to brief his commander and for the lashing that would surely come. It would not be much longer now before he would have far better news to report.

And then all of Sanctuary will burn.

Chapter Twenty-One



The Church of the Holy Order

The Horadrim kept to less-traveled paths for the next few days, sleeping in brief stretches with lookouts. Zayl used a concealment spell that deadened the sound of their footsteps and cloaked their forms from sight. There was no sign of the phantoms that had plagued them, and the Sicarai did not appear again.

Jacob walked at Shanar's side and kept the destroyer's sword at his waist at all times. Tyrael had presented it to him before they left Commander Nahr's home, and the weapon gave him strength and courage that had been missing for far too long. He was beginning to feel whole again, even trying to bridge the chasm between Gynvir and the necromancer, which remained as wide and treacherous as the Gulf of Westmarch. The barbarian appeared changed since the battle on the mountain; an awakening of some kind had occurred, a power that now coiled within her.

Finally, the Horadrim reached the outskirts of the city of Westmarch. They joined a growing flood of people, trying to blend into the crowd. Huge stone walls surrounded an impressive, heavily fortified entrance lined with lookouts and archers. Westmarch was thriving, in stark contrast with Bramwell, and much larger, with ramparts and stone buildings rising up through seemingly endless hills.

The familiar shape of the snarling wolf was set against deep red banners that snapped in the wind as the Horadrim entered the gates along with carts laden with goods, drawn by packbeasts and others on foot. Jacob could smell the city, a heady mixture of scalded meats and spices, sweat, spoiled refuse, animal spoor, and muddy ground. It reminded him of the area around the trade tents in Caldeum. People jostled one another, shouted out their wares, bickered over prices. Energy and excitement mixed with an undercurrent of violence.

The road was paved with thick cobblestones, and scattered straw soaked up mule droppings and urine. Makeshift display tents lined any available space of the open market. Spice traders and dealers of fine cloth tried to lure people in. One old woman promising to read their fortunes would not be easily refused; she grabbed Jacob's cloak with fingers gnarled by arthritis, but he shook her off, and she spit after him and cursed as they kept moving.

The city was loud and thick with people as they walked. They did not see the man in armor until he was directly in front of them.

Suddenly, the crowd parted as if by magic, and the man walked

through, the metal point of his spear ringing on the stone. The people around them fell back, staring, as if waiting for the show to begin. He wore an armored breastplate and sword, and his eyes flashed above a heavy beard. "State your purpose here," he said.

"We look to speak with Lorath Nahr," Tyrael said. "We have word from his father in Bramwell."

The man's eyes narrowed further as he glanced at the others. "I do not know this Lorath," he said. "But your kind is not welcome here." He gestured at Shanar and Zayl with his spear. "Wizards and necromancers have no place in the City of the Light."

"Perhaps you could guide us to the Church of the Holy Order," Tyrael said. "We also have business there."

"What business is that?"

"We seek Norlun," he said.

"And why should he see you?"

"We are holy warriors who wish to help his cause in any way we can."

At this, the man's demeanor changed, and his body relaxed slightly. He looked around at the crowd. None of them met his gaze. "You seek enlightenment, then," he said. "I can take you there. You should pray you find his favor."

A *templar*. Jacob's hand crept toward the weapon belted to his waist.

"My companions must secure lodging for us," Tyrael said. "Is there an inn nearby?"

"The Snapping Dog," the man said. He glanced at Jacob, then back at Tyrael. "Just around the bend. It's likely to have beds, although the bugs may be thick as the thieves that sleep with them."

Tyrael turned to Jacob. "Go there, and take the others with you. Cullen, Thomas, and I will rejoin you later."



The man led them slowly through the city streets, past huge stone buildings, archways, and alleys, gutters thick with slow-moving black water and refuse. The smells continued to assault them from the doorways of shops and dark corners where beggars hunched in the shadows.

As they continued a gentle climb up toward the center of the city, the buildings grew larger and more ornate, with turrets and window slits and ribbed vaults and buttresses, gargoyles perched on rooftops overlooking the wandering crowds. There were more people gathered

in an open market, jostling one another to get away as the templar pushed through.

Tyrael caught glimpses of the old cathedral long before they reached it. The building rose up beyond the closer structures like a monstrous stone beast, its pointed turret and stained glass seeming to glow from within. The cathedral had been here for centuries, built for the Zakarum, Cullen explained, and later used by the Knights of Westmarch before they became a more secular order, concerned mostly with the protection of the king and Westmarch's borders.

"From what I have heard, the knights still consider it theirs," he said quietly, eyeing the back of the man who strode ahead. "If the templar control it, there is bound to be tension between them."

As they reached the cathedral, several more men with somber expressions met them. The guards were jumpy. The first templar spoke to the others for a few moments, gesturing, and then returned to Tyrael with a scowl. "Norlun is attending to business," he said. "You may wait inside."

They were ushered through the main alcove and into the vast inner hall of worship, made entirely of stone, the floor inlaid with a pattern of lines like a web. A massive carving loomed on their left before a short set of steps, candles flickering. A few men were gathered there, talking; they grew silent as the Horadrim were led through their midst, past wooden pews and away from the raised altar, into another hallway.

Before their guide led them into a small waiting room, Tyrael noticed another door at the far end of the hall, barred and guarded by two more armed men. Then the man closed the door behind him, leaving them alone.

A tapestry made of blue silk was hanging on the wall. Cullen lifted the edge to reveal the Zakarum crest carved into the stone underneath. Candles burned in tall silver clasps, filling the room with light.

Thomas began pacing back and forth. "That was too easy," he said. "I don't like this. Why would they let us in here without checking our weapons first?"

Tyrael had thought much the same thing. They might have walked right into a trap. But if the lost city of the nephalem was under the cathedral and they had to go through the templar to get there, so be it.

The people of that city have no idea what danger they're in, Nahr had said. The king will demand a cleansing.

The cleansing might be coming sooner than anyone expected.

Tyrael's thoughts were cut short by the sound of footsteps approaching. The door swung open, and a man swept in, ruddy-

cheeked and appearing slightly out of breath. He was thin and of average height and did not immediately fit the mold of leading a group such as this. Although he kept a blue sash at his waist, he did not wear the templar armor. But his gaze was like ice, and he clearly commanded respect from the men following him, who bowed and left the room. "I am Norlun," he said. "Leader of the Westmarch Order of the Templar. What is your business?"

"We travel from Caldeum," Tyrael said. He shook Norlun's outstretched hand and found his grip firm. "You may have heard about recent troubles there, but it is likely you do not know the truth of it. The uprising by the emperor's guard against the people was driven by demons, not men. We fought against the darkness there and have seen horrors few others have. We fear the same thing happening in Westmarch."

"What does that have to do with us?"

"We seek to join with men who are principled and strong enough to do what is necessary when the time comes. Even if it means betraying the king."

Norlun's eyes narrowed. "We are a peaceful order and wish only to banish the darkness and serve the Light."

"As do we," Tyrael said. "But sometimes . . . there are hard choices to make."

Norlun studied him for a long moment. The door opened, and a burly man entered. "Lord," he said. "You had asked to know when—"

"Not now," Norlun snapped. "Tell Stefan and Kamir to wait outside."

The young man nodded and closed the door quickly.

"Hard choices indeed," Norlun said. "You will have some before you shortly, if I am right. But the templar have been given a holy charge, and we intend to take this message to the people. We work to cleanse those sinners who have embraced the darkness, and they are reborn through us as children of the Light, scrubbed clean and pure. We wish no trouble from the Zakarum, the knights, or King Justinian, unless they bring it to us."

"Perhaps we have come to the wrong place, then."

"Here is what I think," Norlun said. "I think you have been sent as spies by the king to gather information about our order, perhaps even to infiltrate it. I think the knights are threatened by our presence and would wish nothing less than to stamp it out."

"If so," Tyrael said, holding the man's gaze, "we know nothing of it."

"Or perhaps the Zakarum are behind this, still pulling the strings," Norlun said. "They continue to hold more sway in this city than most believe." He shrugged. "No matter. I answer only to the grand maester

of the templar order and sometimes, truth be told, not even to him. My men understand our mission and will die for me, if necessary. Here are two of them.” He opened the door to show two men outside standing rigidly at attention. “They wait on my orders. Make no mistake, we will do what must be done to cleanse evil from Westmarch and our surrounding lands and bring the people to the Light.”

There was silence in the room for a long moment. Tyrael waited to see if the templar would draw their weapons. But they did not move, and Norlun finally smiled. “Now you will do something for me,” he said. “Bring this back to the king. We wish to continue our mission in peace, bringing our message to Westmarch, one man at a time. But we will not be intimidated, and should the knights attempt to stamp us out, they will be surprised at what they find. We have support among the people. The Church of the Holy Order may have been built by the Zakarum, but it is a templar church now and shall remain so.”

“If we knew the king, we would,” Tyrael said.

Norlun’s toothy grin grew wider. “Slippery of you, isn’t it? But you want something. You won’t get it here.” Norlun gave a brief nod to his men, and they stepped aside. “You are free to leave and bring my message to Justinian,” he said. “I would not linger here any longer, if I were you.”

Tyrael grew close and the two guards tensed, hands gripping their spears. Norlun took the slightest step back, and his steely-eyed expression failed for just a brief moment.

“Perhaps we will meet again,” Tyrael said.

He left the smaller man without another word, Thomas and Cullen following in his wake. The door at the end of the hall was still barred and guarded by two armed men.

As they made their way back through the old Zakarum cathedral, he thought he heard the faint sound of a scream filtering up from somewhere below their feet, but he could not be sure.



Having secured three flea-bitten rooms for them at the Inn of the Snapping Dog, Jacob set about getting word to Lorath Nahr. It wasn’t difficult; a guardsman in the streets knew the name and promised to bring the young knight back with him in short order, after being told they had brought an urgent message from Lorath’s father in Bramwell.

The guard told them to wait in the tavern on the ground floor of the inn. The monk and the necromancer went off on their own. Gynvir

seemed relieved to see Zayl go. They had settled into an uneasy truce, but even Zayl's efforts at the nephalem temple had not swayed her opinion of him, and Jacob was reluctant to speak of it. Zayl was useful to the group in many ways, but her distrust of his kind ran through deep and treacherous waters that he did not want to cross.

Jacob took a corner table at the tavern with Shanar and Gynvir. They ordered mutton and bread and mead and listened to the conversations of the people of Westmarch. There was an undercurrent of tension even as they drank their fill and made merry; rumors of strange disappearances were circulating. A man at another table nearby was discussing a possible uprising against the king's guard, while most declared the whole thing to be a silly fiction, propagated by those who did not like the new curfew declared after three knights were found dead, their throats slit by unknown assailants.

"Commander Nahr was right," Shanar said. "There's darkness in Westmarch." She looked at Jacob, something else flickering in her eyes. "You gained a little of the old swagger back on the road, though, didn't you?" She glanced at Gynvir, a half-smile gracing her pretty lips. "Better watch out, or the barbarian will carry you off to her cave."

Gynvir colored slightly before looking away. "I have no cave," she said. "And it's you who have the history with him, not me."

Shanar was correct, Jacob thought. He did feel different. Closer to the way he used to feel when El'druin had given him strength and courage to do what was right. And yet things had changed for him back in Tristram in other ways. He touched the puckered scar on his shoulder. Could the phantoms follow them into the city? Or were they already here?

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival at their table of the guardsman, who introduced a young man in knight's armor as Lorath Nahr. The man was blond-haired and blue-eyed and bore little resemblance to the commander, except for the cut of his jaw and his broad forehead.

"You have word from my father? How do I know you speak the truth? It is a dangerous time to be trusting strangers."

Jacob pulled the sword free of its sheath, just enough to show him the brand seared into leather, careful not to reveal the strange blade to others. "He did this work for me," Jacob said. "If you join us here for a drink, we can talk about how we might help each other."

"Who are you?"

"We are Horadrim," Jacob said. "On a mission of utmost importance. The fate of Sanctuary may depend on it. And time is running short."

After a moment's hesitation, Lorath dismissed the guardsman and

took a seat. Jacob waited until the people nearby had turned back to their conversations and Lorath had ordered a mug of mead. After it arrived and the young man had taken a long pull, Jacob explained that his father had told him something of what they faced in Westmarch.

"I have sent several men over the past few weeks to Bramwell, asking for him to come with his forces," Lorath said. "None of them has returned."

"They may have been taken on the road."

"The templar are growing bolder," Lorath said. "But taking the king's men . . ." He shook his head. "Even they are unlikely to try such a brazen act." He hesitated. "There have been rumors of other disappearances and sightings of things better left unexplained."

Jacob told him what they had found in Bramwell, keeping his voice low enough not to be overheard by others. Lorath listened with slowly widening eyes, an expression that grew hard and furious at the account of the bodies piled inside the forgotten chambers on the mountain. "Accounts here are similar," he said quietly, taking a moment to look around the room. Nobody seemed to be paying them much attention. "Many in the knights' inner circle feel these sightings of strange creatures have something to do with the templar, even though the things people describe do not seem to be of this world. The king is furious, and General Torion has had enough. I need to get word to my father to return to Westmarch and bring his men. It may already be too late."

"Perhaps we can help. Several members of our party are visiting the Church of the Holy Order right now—"

"There are more of you?" Lorath's gaze and tone were sharp. "How many? And what are they doing at the cathedral?"

"Weighing the situation and searching for weaknesses in the templar armor, so to speak," Shanar said. "There may be something inside that we need, and we can't afford to ask nicely."

Jacob expected the young man to be skeptical, but Lorath listened intently as they told their story, sometimes asking questions, seeming thoughtful and increasingly enthusiastic. He had studied with the best tutors in Westmarch, he said, and had learned about the history of the Horadrim through one of them who knew the ancient legends of the order. They had always fascinated him. "I used to pretend to be a Horadric hero when I was a boy," he said. "Fighting monsters with my wooden sword. Feels like a long time ago."

"You may yet have your chance," a voice said. Jacob looked up to find Tyrael standing over them with Thomas and Cullen at his side. "There is a barred and guarded door in the church that leads to lower levels," he said. "We need to find out what is behind it."

“I may be able to help with that,” Lorath said.



The group retired to their quarters for more privacy. They sat on cots dragged together in one of the small rooms as twilight fell over the city, and the shouts and cries of the inn’s drunken and lascivious patrons could be heard through the walls. If the templar recruited thieves and scoundrels, Jacob thought, they might begin right here at the Snapping Dog. But it gave the Horadrim a way to blend in; nobody asked many questions here, and they had been left alone.

Jacob was itching for battle. His fingers tingled, the sword at his side warm against his flesh. Shanar sat close enough to touch. He caught her sidelong glances, and the idea of her body pressed against his made him remember days past. It almost seemed as if things could be just as they were before, when they had fought against the plague demons and slaving hordes of the Burning Hells and had shared a bed together.

Lorath explained the situation in Westmarch in greater detail. Even though the templar were close cousins of the Zakarum faithful, their rise had threatened the Knights of Westmarch, he said. “Some former knights have joined them, but most do not trust or believe in what the Westmarch templar are doing—particularly under the leadership of Norlun. We recently intercepted a note that indicated they are preparing for a rebellion against the king. General Torion has decided to move against the templar and end the threat now before this gets out of control.”

“We need to get back inside that building,” Cullen said.

“The church’s lower levels run deep, and we suspect that they hide some of the templar’s most treacherous deeds,” Lorath said. “You are powerful mages and warriors. You want to find what’s behind that barred door, and we could use a helping hand.”

“Norlun thought we were spies sent by the knights to infiltrate his operations,” Tyrael said. “Perhaps he was not far off. We were able to assess a few weaknesses in their defenses in the church. The worship room is large, but visibility to the outside is poor. Although they have a single main entrance to protect, if we were to gain access in secret, they would fall quickly.”

The door opened, and Mikulov and the necromancer came in. “There is darkness indeed here in Westmarch,” Zayl said without preamble. “We have both felt it. The phantoms are still close.”

A strange feeling prickled Jacob’s skin, and the scar on his shoulder

throbbed softly. "I can sense them, too," he said. He had blurted it out without thinking, but the others stared at him now as he rubbed his shoulder where the throbbing had begun. "I think we had better not waste much time," he said.

"The general has a meeting with Commander Barnard and his top leadership tonight to outline our approach," Lorath said. "He trusts me implicitly. I can get him to accept your help."

"It would be good for me to go with you," Zayl said.

Lorath looked skeptical. "Forgive me for saying so, but the general—the knights themselves, actually—don't take kindly to your—"

"That may be, but General Torion will listen this time," Humbart cut in from Zayl's pouch. Gynvir muttered under her breath as the necromancer withdrew the skull, eliciting a gasp and an involuntary grimace of distaste from the young knight. Humbart gave a short laugh. "Don't act so shocked, lad; it's just a bit of bone. We have a history together, Torion and Zayl and me. And the remaining servants of the house of Nesardo shall vouch for us, too."

Zayl nodded. "Humbart is right. The general may distrust necromancers, but he knows my intentions are honorable."

"Very well," Lorath said. He eyed the skull warily. "I've heard of such things, even studied historical accounts, but I've never seen . . ."

"I'm not an exhibit for your entertainment," Humbart said. "Quit your staring, lad! I may be dead, but have some sense of decency."

"My apologies," Lorath said. He broke his gaze away from the gleaming skull. "Perhaps I should be going. There's not much time left."

"I might suggest you send a messenger to Bramwell for help and another to our remaining Horadric brothers in Gea Kul, asking them to come to Westmarch," Thomas said. "Not knights but people who can blend in and are less likely to be taken on the way. If the nephalem stronghold is here and the phantoms are close by, I suspect that we will need as many fighters as we can get very soon."

Chapter Twenty-Two



The Assault on the Templar

Tyrael was introduced to the general and his acting commander in a private room outside the king's palace two hours before the knights advanced upon the Church of the Holy Order. The general was a fairly large man who kept himself fit, although he was entering his later years. His hair was swept away from a handsome face that had grown rough over time, icy blue eyes still sharp above a slightly scarred cheek, a long, hooked nose, and a neatly trimmed gray beard.

Commander Barnard, by contrast, was smaller and far less imposing, and he deferred to Torion whenever the two men were together. Tyrael suspected the men under Barnard's command would have preferred Nahr to return from Bramwell to lead them, if given the choice.

Zayl had already prepped the men on their story, and Tyrael outlined what they had seen inside the Church of the Holy Order. Torion appeared to trust the necromancer enough to let the Horadrim ride along. He had seen what Zayl was capable of when the necromancer had taken down the spider demon Astrogha years before. A mage like that was a valuable asset; several of them at once were enough to turn the tide if things got rough.

The forces of the Knights of Westmarch gathered near the cathedral in the early hours of the morning. The moon was mostly hidden behind clouds, and the streets were nearly deserted, but General Torion and Commander Barnard took no chances, keeping rigid order, their men silent as the dead and lookouts watching carefully at strategic locations for templar spies.

Torion was even more impressive in full armor, his wolf's head helmet glinting in the faint light from above. The sour-sweet smell of refuse rose like a noxious cloud from the gutters. At this hour, the lanterns were extinguished, candles out in bedroom windows, people tucked into their beds. Torion directed Barnard to take men around the back of the cathedral, while he led the approach from the front. "We will move decisively and with overwhelming force," he said. "I want as little hand-to-hand combat as possible. The people of Westmarch must wake up tomorrow knowing nothing of what happened while they were sleeping. But make no mistake: none of these templar is innocent, and they will not hesitate to take your life if given the chance. You may recognize a few faces. But if they were your brothers or neighbors, they are no longer those men. They have been trained to kill, and what they have planned for this city is far

worse than you can imagine. This is a preemptive strike—”

A cry split the silence from somewhere near the cathedral, followed by the clash of swords. Someone had been discovered, the alarm raised.

Torion swore loudly, gesturing at Barnard. “Move, now!”

The commander rushed forward, but Lorath paused briefly at Tyrael’s side. “Do what you can to get in,” he said quietly. “Now is your chance.”

Lorath took the men under his own command and darted away. More swordplay rang out in the deserted streets above shouts of men and the cry of someone badly wounded.

“I can get us in,” Zayl said at Tyrael’s side. “A simple spell.”

Tyrael nodded. “Do it, and quickly,” he said.



Zayl raised a spell that descended over the closest templar, deadening sound and dimming light, surrounding them in a sphere of silence and darkness. The group ran directly past three templar near the cathedral’s entrance. Nobody saw them or heard their passage. Other templar were stationed at openings high in the walls, ready to loose arrows at any knights who got too close. *Someone has tipped them off*, Tyrael thought. But the enemy was struck blind; the necromancer’s spell would let the Horadrim cross the open square to the cathedral’s front door without any trouble.

The problem was getting inside. Surely the door had been barred. They might be able to take it off its hinges and storm in, but the fighting would be fierce, and the archers could be dangerous from above once their vision returned. The spell kept the Horadrim hidden temporarily, but did not protect them from harm.

Tyrael held up a hand, and they stopped just before the front steps. “A special curse should do the trick.” Humbart spoke up from the pouch. “Remember that time at the Black Ram, lad?”

Zayl nodded. He concentrated for a long moment, speaking under his breath, and a startled shout came from inside, along with the sound of fighting. A few seconds later, something crashed to the ground, the door flew open, and a man came stumbling out, screaming and clawing at his own face with both hands, nails digging into his flesh and pulling rivers of blood across his cheeks. The templar guard shrieked again, babbling like a madman about demons; he turned, waving his arms at invisible attackers, and went tumbling down the wide stone steps, landing in a broken heap at Tyrael’s feet.

The Horadrim wasted no time, racing up the steps toward the open door. A large man in armor, one of those who had stood at attention earlier during their meeting with Norlun, was stumbling blindly forward. Tyrael slashed his neck with El'druin, feeling a twinge of regret as he pushed the dying man aside. Torion had said these men had been tortured into believing they were on the right side of justice. But Norlun was not the kind of man who would hesitate in ordering the Horadrim's heads separated from their shoulders, and there would be much more bloodshed to come if they did not act now. *Weigh the consequences of failing to act. Two lives in exchange for many more . . .*

Then they were all through and into the antechamber. Tyrael rapidly sheathed his weapon. Zayl's spell held as they ran by more templar, who were seemingly oblivious to the group of invaders in their midst. That was good; they could have attempted to take on the templar here, but their true purpose was to get to the barred door down the hall as quickly as possible.

Tyrael led the way through the worship room, remaining close to the wall and avoiding the main part of it, which was full of templar shouting orders. Norlun was nowhere to be seen. Tyrael entered the rear hallway past the room where they had met the templar leader earlier. The door at the end of the hall was still guarded by two templar, their weapons out. Zayl's magic was fading; Tyrael could see the men's eyes grow wide, and one charged forward.

Jacob met him with the Hallowed Destroyer.

The weapon flashed brilliantly as it crashed down to meet the templar's spear, shattering it and continuing through the man's chest, nearly cutting him in two. Blood gushed from the gruesome wound as the guard's body toppled in pieces. The other guard cried out in alarm before Jacob silenced him with another mighty blow, slicing off his head.

More shouts came from inside the worship room, along with the sound of running feet. Shanar and Gynvir turned back to distract the templar while Thomas removed a set of keys from one of the dead guards, unlocking the heavy clasp that held the iron bar across the door in place as Shanar's magic crackled to life, energy cascading from her fingers.

The door swung open, revealing a set of stone steps lit by lanterns attached to the rough-hewn walls. An echoing scream rose from below as Tyrael led the rest of the Horadrim into the cavernous spaces beneath the cathedral.

The steps ended in a long room with a barrel ceiling made of brick, support columns holding up the massive weight of the structure above their heads. Torches had been set into metal clasps, sending firelight flickering across their faces. Farther down, doors with iron bars lined

both sides of the room. There were men inside the cells. Some of the prisoners came to the bars and shouted to be let out, while others remained motionless in the shadows. Those who showed their faces were badly bruised and beaten, and some were cadaverously thin.

Several templar in the room sprang forward at the sight of the Horadrim, but they were no real threat. Mikulov made short work of the three closest guards, easily avoiding their spear thrusts and stunning them into submission with massive blows of his fists and feet. The two who were left dropped their weapons and went down on their knees, begging for mercy. Thomas found an open cell, spattered with dried blood and with iron shackles secured to the walls. He put the guards inside and slammed the door shut.

They were in a torture chamber.

Tyrael looked around at the stretching rack, hooks stained with blood; an iron maiden with spikes jutting out like jagged teeth; thumbscrews and blades. This was no place of light and justice, no peaceful order fighting back the darkness. Norlun would pay for this.

A commotion on the stairs was followed by Shanar's and Gynvir's appearance. The two women came down fast, clashing with a flood of templar that threatened to overwhelm them through sheer numbers.

"We will hold them off," Tyrael said. He gestured to Thomas and Mikulov, then looked at Cullen. "Go find out what lies beyond this room!"



Cullen's breath was loud in his ears, and his heart beat hard and fast. Images of splattered blood played through his head, and the screams of the wounded followed him as he ran.

Although he would fight when necessary, he was no warrior. Violence had always been a horror to him; he was not built for it, as his mother had said when he had taken a beating from another boy or kept to himself while others were playing with wooden swords and dreaming of going to battle. His father had never understood him, but his mother was more forgiving. *You are a sensitive soul, my Cullen*, she would say, stroking his hair. *Your world is full of books, and you have a thirst for knowledge. Don't lose sight of that. It will save us all someday.*

He had promised her he would not. When he was twelve, she had died of complications giving birth to a second child, and he had vowed to honor her. He had seen the blood between her legs then, and it had stayed with him all these years. His promise and his intellectual curiosity were what had drawn him to the Horadrim in the

first place, and in that, he thought, he was as much like Deckard Cain as he could hope to be.

Cullen hurried through the large chamber, trying to ignore the cries of the imprisoned begging to be set free. He thought through the artifacts they had found, Korsikk's journal, all the signs that pointed here. The entrance to the nephalem stronghold was somewhere below this cathedral—he was certain of it.

The vaulted space led to a stone archway and another room. The last torch did not cast its light inside, and Cullen removed it from its slot on the wall and carried it with him to illuminate his way.

The adjoining room was much older, the ceiling lower and crumbling under the weight of the streets far above. Its former use was a mystery, but the dust that lay over everything was undisturbed. It had not been visited for some time.

He waved the torch around the room. At the far end was an ancient iron grate. He could hear the sound of trickling water. The sewers, perhaps; the smell of them was strong enough to make his eyes water. But that was not what had captured his interest. On his right along the wall, there was a small panel or door set into the stone. It looked like an access door for maintenance, rather than anything people would use regularly. It was low enough that he would have to duck to enter.

Cullen moved the flame closer. The door was created with some kind of metal, but it did not look like anything man-made. Its surface was perfectly smooth and unmarked. There was no handle or sign of any way to get it open. He rapped on it and heard nothing at all; the metal deadened sound, and the door was as solid and immovable as a mountain. Cullen ran his hand along the surface, and to his surprise, he felt a raised pattern of some kind. When he took his hand away, the door rippled, and a circle with a strange slot in the center appeared.

The circle and slot looked familiar to him.

Cullen stuck the torch into a large crack in the floor and fumbled through his rucksack for Korsikk's journal. He flipped through the pages, his heart beating faster. *There*. Near the end of the journal, on a page filled with notes scrawled in the margins, Rakkis's son had drawn a crudely shaped circle with a slit across the middle.

He peered at the page, moving his spectacles lower on his nose until it came into better focus. The handwriting was barely legible, but one entry stood out loud and clear.

Daoril is dead, burned away from the inside out. But we are beyond the door now. I have learned a valuable lesson from many foiled attempts: only a true nephalem shall possess the key to open it.

Cullen sat back, his mind spinning. The door was protected in some way; that much was certain. It also seemed clear that Korsikk had

gotten inside somehow and that it had to do with the powers the nephalem were capable of wielding. Perhaps Shanar or Zayl could find a way in. But Cullen was no nephalem warrior, and he had no hope of breaking the protective spell.

Shouts and the sounds of weaponry echoed from beyond the arch and through the empty room. The battle was moving closer. He flipped through the journal again, frantically scanning the spidery script. *There must be something more here*, he thought, *a key phrase, a spell of some kind . . .* but there was nothing. The final pages beyond the drawing were empty.

He needed to rethink everything, come at the problem from another angle. Perhaps the key to opening the door wasn't some special skill or a spell.

Perhaps the key was a physical one.

The idea hit him like a thunderbolt. With trembling fingers, he pawed through his rucksack once again and found the ancient dagger from the nephalem temple on the mountain. A strangely shaped dagger, to be sure, with a broad, stubby, dull blade and a flat end rather than a point. Not much of a weapon at all, in fact.

A key.

Cullen took it by its jeweled hilt. He felt the power thrumming from deep within the strange object, warming his hand and running up his arm as if something alive had taken hold of him with gentle teeth, and the door responded with a thrumming power of its own. The fit of the grip was familiar in a way he could not explain. Images began rushing through his head: his father, a farmer who worked the fields from dawn to dusk and had been distant and cold, disappointed in such a bookish boy; his mother's face filled with love for him; the library where he had spent so many hours during his early years. These memories dissolved into moments in time he had never experienced and yet recognized as if they were his own, thousands and thousands of shared moments he watched through the eyes of others as they lived and loved, struggled and died. They moved faster and faster, blending together as they raced through his mind, until he began to relive the stories of the ancients he had studied in Horadric tomes—the nephalem of old who walked these lands when they were barely formed—not as he had read them but as if he had actually experienced them.

Cullen fit the flat blade into the slot in the door. It slid home with a click, and he turned the key to the right, rotating the circle with it.

A tremendous surge of power ripped through him, nearly knocking him off his feet. He held on as the energy continued to build, and he felt as if he had begun to burn with a cleansing fire and would be consumed and turned to ash. And then the energy was met with his

own that began deep within him, growing stronger each moment until it pushed the other back, radiating outward and bringing strength to his limbs. He thought he cried out but wasn't sure; the world went gray and then surged to a brilliant, all-consuming white, before slowly fading to a gentle, constant hum that remained with him, filling his soul with light.

Cullen came to himself once again with a feeling of peace and strength that he had never known before. He was still holding the key in its slot, but now the door was ajar.

He gently pulled on the key, and the door swung open without a sound, revealing a set of steps descending into darkness.

Chapter Twenty-Three



The Lost City

The templar had come down fast behind Shanar and Gynvir, but what had appeared to be an offensive move had actually been a retreat as they fought for their lives from the forces above. The knights had since broken through the front door and taken the cathedral, and the fighting there had been fierce. Pressed from the rear by the Horadrim and under siege at the front by the knights, the templar were outmanned. They chose to make a stand in the underground chambers.

The Horadrim did not allow them to stand for long. Shanar's staff flared brightly, sending bolts of fire through their ranks, and Gynvir's axe drew blood. Norlun shouted orders at his men and kept them in front of him. "Do not let them protect the snake any longer!" Tyrael shouted. He pointed at where Norlun hid behind the largest templar, and Mikulov raced through a thicket of waving spears, disarming as many as he could without harming them.

But most of the templar would not surrender, fighting with their bare hands. A dozen more died on the steps before Norlun threw down his weapon and ordered the templar to give up.

The knights surrounded the remaining men, disarming them quickly, and the templar leader proved to be a coward in the end. The sniveling little man was on his knees when Tyrael approached him. Norlun's hands had been lashed together behind him by Gynvir.

"I thought we might meet again," Tyrael said. "Under different circumstances."

"Please," Norlun began, "spare my soul—"

Tyrael took the man by his shirt and lifted him to his feet. He glanced at the instruments of torture along the walls. Anger flooded through him, and he thought of tearing Norlun's head from his shoulders for what he had done.

"Let him go," a voice said. General Torion crossed the stone floor to Tyrael's side. "I would end his life now," he said, "but he deserves to hang in the square, where the citizens of Westmarch can see him."

Tyrael dropped Norlun to the floor. "Put him in with the others," Torion said. The knights led the templar leader to the cell where the guards were being held, as Lorath Nahr, a scratch on his face and blood on his armor, came forward to stand at Torion's side.

"Sir, I have troubling news," Lorath said. "Commander Barnard has succumbed in battle."

The other knights shuffled their feet, murmuring. Torion shot them

a sharp glance. “He died nobly, then,” the general said. “We will give him a hero’s burial. Were there other losses?”

“Eleven knights in all.”

Torion sighed, rubbing his face and looking suddenly older. “Have you gotten word to your father?”

“I sent several messengers for him. At least one will get through.”

“Good. We need him here, now more than ever, to assume his former post.” He turned back to the Horadrim. “The Church of the Holy Order is back in the hands of the people,” he said. “I’m not sure how you gained entrance to the cathedral—some dark spell, no doubt—but without your help, there would have been more bloodshed on both sides.” He indicated Zayl with a gesture. “The necromancer has helped save the city of Westmarch more than once. For that, we are in your debt.”

“Permission to speak freely, sir?” Lorath said. Torion nodded. “The Horadrim seek artifacts important to their order that may be hidden below these chambers. Considering the circumstances, perhaps we could allow them some time to search for them?”

Torion looked doubtful. “Whatever might be here belongs to the people,” he said. “My gratitude does not extend to allowing strange spellcasters to wander around a holy landmark without a guide, archangel or not.”

“I will stay with them, sir,” Lorath said. He glanced at Tyrael. “If they will have me.”

Tyrael nodded. “We are not your enemy, General,” he said. “If young Lorath remaining with us would settle your mind, we are in favor of it.”

“Very well,” Torion said. “We will make sure the grounds are secure and stand guard outside. Norlun does not command as much respect among the people of Westmarch as he thinks, but it would be good to remain vigilant. You have the night to uncover your secrets.”



As the rest of the templar were herded into cells or marched away upstairs by the knights, the Horadrim went deeper beneath the cathedral.

Along with Lorath Nahr, the group reached the end of the larger chamber and passed through the arch that led to the second room. Cullen stood motionless before an opening in the wall, deep in thought. When Thomas touched his shoulder, the smaller man jerked and blinked at them. “I’ve found our hidden entrance,” he said simply.

“Such as it is.”

The others peered into the opening. Steps led into the inky blackness below, the ceiling and walls made of rough stone. The smell of dusty, abandoned spaces wafted up, the air cold on their skin.

Tyrael sent Jacob and Mikulov back to the larger room to gather more torches. The Horadrim took the steps in single file, Tyrael in the lead, Lorath at the rear.

The torch in Tyrael’s hand flickered, although the air was still. The stairs descended on a gentle curve, going on for some time. Eventually, Tyrael began to sense a pattern in things; a thin crack in the wall on his right appeared again a few moments later at the same angle and depth, and a small section of a step that had crumbled was repeated in exactly the same place several dozen steps later.

He paused, bringing the torchlight closer. Footprints were clearly marked in the dust in front of him, but he was certain there hadn’t been footprints at the top of the steps when they had begun, and there was no place along the way where men could enter the staircase. So how had they appeared now?

He felt a touch on his arm. “We are going in circles,” Cullen said. “Those prints are our own. You see?” He placed his sandal on one of the prints, a perfect match. “You are mortal but not human, and the entrance is shielded. Perhaps I should lead.”

Tyrael handed him the torch, and Cullen continued down around the next curve. Almost immediately, the staircase straightened and the steep grade flattened out as the walls widened. A few moments later, the steps ended at the mouth of another tunnel.

They might have gone on forever, Tyrael thought, if not for Cullen. It only served to emphasize that Tyrael was not one of them. He dropped back to Lorath’s place at the rear as the Horadrim continued ahead, walking along a silent and empty path that deadened their footsteps and through an underground cavern that appeared to be naturally formed. The torchlight illuminated the walls as they closed in before the cavern expanded again and the ceiling soared above their heads. Although the path forward was well worn, there was no sign that any humans had been here for centuries or more. Once or twice, they heard something like water trickling somewhere out of sight, but they never saw evidence of it, and still the cavern continued on endlessly into darkness.



They spoke softly at first, and then their voices faded away naturally

into silence as they went on. The magnitude of the cavern demanded quiet respect, as if their words were an offense to the gods gathered there. A weight seemed to fill the air around them, the swirl of dust beneath their feet bringing with it the smell of history.

It was not, Cullen thought, at all what he had expected. There was no evidence that the firstborn nephalem had ever been here; the cavern had been carved from violent, rushing waters centuries ago, judging from the shape of the walls and floor. But it felt oddly familiar to him all the same, as if he had been here many years ago as a small child. There was an entire world underneath the ground, one that had remained in a suspended state waiting for their return. *His* return, Cullen thought. What had happened with the key and the power that had run through him had changed him in some fundamental way, as if he had previously lived an entire life and only now had become aware of it.

At one point, they came to a natural bridge of stone that spanned a chasm far too deep for their torches to reveal the bottom, and the echo of their footsteps here bounced back to them as if they were being followed by invisible figures. The necromancer and his skull muttered softly to each other; Zayl asked for Cullen's torch and took the lead, with Cullen and Thomas remaining immediately behind and Mikulov following. The bridge was narrow, and they had to cross it in single file, the floor on either side dropping away into nothing, pebbles rattling down into the depths at their passage like small animals scrambling to get away.

As the last one cleared the bridge, a deep, threatening groan echoed through the chamber, shaking the floor beneath them. The stone bridge separated with a cracking sound, and a fissure appeared halfway across before the stone settled again and became still. The gap was nearly four feet across.

Shanar stepped to the beginning of the bridge, holding out her torch for a better look. "No way to go but forward," she muttered, as the group stared through the flickering light. "I hope there's another way out of here, or we're going to become part of the lost city ourselves."

"We could try to make it over," Cullen said. But when Shanar stepped out onto the bridge, the stone groaned again and seemed to shift, and she leaped back to safe ground. There was no choice but to keep going.

They walked for long enough that time seemed to blend and then stop altogether. It could have been one hour or ten, and Cullen felt himself fall back into the dreamlike state that had come over him as he had slipped the key into the lock. The spirits of the dead had come to rest within him, and the necromancer must have felt something,

too, for he glanced back sharply at Cullen several times, and the skull kept muttering things that were too low for anyone to hear.

Sometime after they crossed the bridge, the path began to descend, slowly at first and then more steeply. Later they came to a place where the cavern opened up again and the tunnel branched; to the right, a path climbed gently upward before disappearing into the inky black. But to their left was a shallow alcove containing something that made Cullen catch his breath.

A statue of a man had been carved from the rock, as if it had just stepped out of the wall fully formed. The statue was incredibly lifelike, more than twice the size of Tyrael himself. The man's flowing robes seemed to move in the flickering torchlight, his long hair cascading over his shoulders. His strong jaw and clear forehead would have been handsome were it not for the hard angle of his eyes, which were cast upward as if glaring at an imminent threat.

"By the Light," Lorath breathed softly. "I have never seen—I would not have thought that such a thing could exist here."

Inscribed in the rock wall next to the statue's arm was a circle with a slit across the center.

The necromancer held a torch as Cullen touched the circle with his fingers. This was for him, he realized, for all of them, a symbol of their heritage and their destiny, a circle that had begun near the dawn of time in Sanctuary, which they completed now with their presence here.

He took the ornate key out of his rucksack and slipped it home.

A thrum of power raced through him, similar to the one before, but this time, he was ready for it. Almost instantly, Cullen felt his own body respond, a call and answer to something ancient and unknown.

A sound like the deep and mournful call of an ocean beast echoed through the cavern. The statue rotated its head, staring at the newcomers. Its gaze fixed upon Tyrael, stone eyes remaining locked on the archangel's face.

The circle began to shimmer and dissolve, and the shimmering continued outward until the entire section of the wall was as transparent as a pane of glass. On the other side of the wall stood two massive columns and two more statues, these of women with beckoning arms outstretched. Cullen stepped forward through the shimmering wall as if passing through water, feeling only a momentary shiver before he was beyond it and alone.

He looked back. Thomas passed through the wall, and then one at a time, the rest of the Horadrim came like ghosts through the veil between what seemed to be the living world and the dead.

Eventually, they all gathered beyond it, and as the last one passed through, the wall became whole again. The space was open now, the

circle complete.

Cullen turned back to see what lay before them.



In contrast to the natural caverns, the new space they had entered was definitely built by humans, Tyrael thought, holding up a torch for a better view. It was a large chamber. The floor beyond where they stood was constructed of stones of different sizes, the walls built with blocks stacked in symmetrical lines with inset panels and alcoves. Directly beyond was another series of columns on either side of a set of wide steps that descended into the darkness.

The lost city of the nephalem? It seemed possible they had found it at last. But if so, it was nothing like what he had expected. When the shimmering ceased, the statues appeared to return to their natural state. Some kind of magic had secured the entrance, Tyrael thought, and Cullen had broken through it, allowing them to enter.

Tyrael walked through the silent chamber. Did the fact that he, a mortal angel, was able to set foot here mean that the protective spell was no longer in effect?

He crossed the floor to the edge of the steps. The space below opened up like another room of some kind, but it was deserted and dusty, much like the rest of the caverns. Two shorter columns topped with stone bowls stood on either side of the steps. Tyrael touched the torch to one, and it burst into blue flame. He lit the other, and the chamber was filled with a strange, otherworldly glow. There was magic here, he thought, to keep fuel in place for so long.

They took the steps down and explored the lower level, lighting more bowls of flame. Hallways led off from the chamber into silent rooms and larger spaces. There were areas with intricate patterns in the floors and walls, more alcoves and platforms, structures that appeared to have some purpose lost over time. Strange, arched windows led nowhere; columns of stone supported ceilings that soared overhead.

The halls and chambers went on and on. But everything was empty and coated in dust. There was no apparent salvation here, no greater magic that would aid their quest. The lost city was not what they had hoped to find. *A place of great power once, perhaps, long abandoned by those who created it. A city without a purpose.* The conviction that had carried Tyrael for so long began to fade. All this time, even with his own personal doubts, he had put his faith in finding this place, in the sense that they would have some protection from the legions of angels

that would descend upon them from the Heavens should their thievery be discovered. Now he thought only of the long odds of their mission's success. The Horadrim had grown stronger, and their small team had begun to show signs of working together, but they were not close to ready. He still had much to do in order to prepare them for the things they would experience in the Silver City. And what good was all that if they had nowhere to hide once they returned to Sanctuary?

It was a fool's errand, a suicide mission with no hope for any of them.

Tyrael turned back to the Horadrim gathered before him. They were exhausted and waiting on his lead. Somehow, he knew, he must find the strength to inspire them. He must not show his own disappointment or weakness.

Peer into the chalice, and all will once again become clear.

The voice in his head was thunderous. Tyrael reached toward the pocket in his robes. Chalad'ar was there, calling to him. The urge to leave the others and give in to the call consumed him like a burning thirst. What were they to him? Death would come to them sooner or later, as it did to all mortals. Their lives were nothing in the larger scheme of things and would be forgotten soon enough, just as those who lived and died here in these catacombs had been lost to the dust of time.

The trance was broken by Mikulov, with Lorath just behind him. The monk came forward with the young man as the others spoke quietly among themselves. Mikulov gestured to Lorath, who stood with hands clasped in front of him. The look in his eyes was difficult to read. "Young Lorath pointed something out to me," the monk said. "I suggested he speak with you."

Lorath shrugged, and spoke hesitantly. "The statue at the entrance to this place watched you pass through the wall. It did not watch any of the others."

"And what else?" Mikulov said. "Speak plainly; this is important."

"When you entered, the two female statues also tracked your movements. I thought perhaps it's because you are . . . different."

"Mortal, he means. Not angel or demon," Mikulov said. "But not human, either. Perhaps this place does not know what to make of you." The monk stepped closer. "It means that magic remains in the lost city. It means that the protective spell is still in place, and the guardians are assessing what to do with you. At least for now, they have decided you are not a threat."

The whispers in Tyrael's mind subsided. He thought of Imperius in the Heavens, their confrontation in the Council room, the shedding of his wings, and all that came after: his brother's anger and Auriel's disappointment and sadness. He thought of the angel's birth at the

Arch, the tainted gray strands of her Lightsong wrapping themselves around her wings while he stood by helplessly and watched. The Black Soulstone sat on its perch even now, turning all that came within its growing shadow to darkness and destruction, and no one in the Heavens could stop it.

He was a mortal. His life had forever changed, and his body's aches and pains would only grow worse as he slid toward inevitable death. He would leave this world sooner or later, and he would do it apart from the Heavens and the angels he had known since his own birth at the Arch, millennia ago. He would do it without the comfort of knowing he was human, either. Those who would die before him were not brothers but strangers.

But that did not mean he should refuse his duty and turn a blind eye to the darkness and the corruption that he saw. Imperius had made his decision; he had judged the human race to be lesser beings incapable of triumphing over their own base instincts. He saw humans as weak and dangerous, and therefore he believed they should be destroyed. And he would not stop until the Angiris Council—the entire Heavens—agreed that it must be done.

To refuse to stand against this was a far worse crime than going against the wishes of the Council.

“The Ivgorod monks have a saying,” Mikulov said. “‘Without a beginning, there is no end.’ We must start somewhere, and this place”—he motioned to the empty halls beyond—“is as good as any. I sense you remain conflicted, and perhaps there is a good reason for it. But the object you carry is not the answer. You have brought us this far. We cannot turn back now.”

Tyrael opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He realized he had no idea what to say. The two stood a few feet apart, regarding each other. The monk seemed to pose a question with his steady, patient gaze.

Which will you choose?

“This place is a dump,” Shanar said finally, breaking the silence. “They should dismiss the chambermaid.”

Her attempt at humor barely drew a soft chuckle from Jacob, and more silence came from the rest of the Horadrim. Thomas had found a seat on a low wall, head in his hands. Gynvir was pacing a good distance away from the necromancer, who still held one of the torches. Even Humbart was uncharacteristically silent.

“It was abandoned long ago,” Cullen said. The scholar's plump face was wan, his shoulders slumped in defeat, the new energy that had animated him seeming to bleed away with the gloom. “There is nothing left for us, it seems. What now?”

“It has been a long journey,” Tyrael said. He gathered his breath,

finding focus for what he needed to say. "But this was never our ultimate destination." He stepped past Lorath and the monk into the center of their small circle and gestured at Cullen. "Remind us of what we know of these catacombs."

Cullen blinked rapidly, swallowed. "There isn't much in the ancient texts," he began slowly, looking around at the others as he warmed to the task. "Legends say the lost city of the nephalem was primarily a place of peace and shelter, shielding them through very powerful spells or energy of some kind. It was constructed by one named Daedessa the Builder. Korsikk's journal seems to confirm that Rakkis had found much the same stories through his own research and believed these stories to be true. It is why Rakkis chose to be buried here. He was seeking the power and protection he thought the catacombs provided."

Tyrael nodded. "I can tell you that the angels never knew of this place through all the years it has existed, and it appears that the Burning Hells never discovered it, either. Does that tell you something?"

"I suspect the power that shields this place is tied to the creation of Sanctuary itself," Cullen said, "and the interaction between the physical and ethereal planes. But the destruction of the Worldstone did not seem to weaken it. It may even be that this place exists within its own realm and that we have crossed over a bridge between worlds."

"And do you think that by entering here, we have altered it in some way, opened this bridge to others?" asked Tyrael.

Slowly, Cullen shook his head. "The power is tied to the nephalem. One of them can open the door, but it will close again." He looked around at the Horadrim. "One of *us*," he said. "I did this, with the key—it tapped into something within me, a push and pull that I felt in my bones."

"At some point in the past, you have all done something to tap into the power within you," Tyrael said. "You are all nephalem. It is your birthright, your essence, given to you by the blood that runs through your veins. The very shape of these chambers can channel this energy, providing a focal point as you learn to control it, resonating at the proper pitch to increase these abilities, just as the Crystal Arch's song does for the Heavens. But we must find the tomb. Rakkis would have chosen the center, where the power was the strongest. The tomb will provide a base of operations and the place in which to bury the stone forever, once we have retrieved it."

"If we retrieve it," Shanar muttered. "Jury's still out on that."

The wizard's seemingly offhand remark struck perilously close to the truth.

Lorath spoke up. The young man was nervous, his gaze flitting from face to face. “I do not know you well,” he said. “But I do know of the Horadrim. It is said that my family is descended from knights who fought alongside the great Horadric mages Tal Rasha and Jered Cain during the battles against the Prime Evils. As a young man, my own uncle, Adleric, was part of the forces of Westmarch that fought against King Leoric’s army when the king went mad. Adleric even once met Deckard Cain in Tristram, and he has seen demons with his own eyes.”

Lorath paused, as if gathering himself. “I believe in your quest,” he said. “I want to become a part of history, fight alongside you, and learn the ways of the Horadrim.”

“That’s a great story, kid, and a touching thing to say,” Shanar said. “But being part of a battle against the Burning Hells without any real training—or against the Luminarei from the Heavens, for that matter— isn’t an honorable pursuit. It’s a death sentence.”

“I’m not a boy,” Lorath said. “I’m a lieutenant in the knights under the commander—my father, now that Commander Barnard is dead. And I have been told I have a knack for magic. Perhaps—”

“We owe the young man a great deal already,” Thomas cut in. “We could use his help in working with the knights.”

Tyrael was uncertain whether it was wise to take on what might be another liability at such a crucial time. Lorath had no idea what he would face, and they had no way of knowing what he would do when pushed. But several others were nodding at Thomas’s words and seemed ready to accept the young man, at least for now.

They had much work to do if they had the barest chance of success, and they could use the knights’ support. It was time now to begin the planning and the training in earnest. They would have to prepare themselves for what lay ahead. The High Heavens would offer many nearly impossible challenges for mortal beings, both physical and psychological. They would be tested to their limits. In order to escape with their lives, they would need to learn how to precisely control their nephalem abilities and to resist the wonders and horrors they would encounter.

Most chilling of all, Tyrael’s plan depended on Shanar learning how to use her unique abilities in a way that had never been attempted before—and failure would mean their certain doom. And he did not yet know if he could trust her.

Tyrael felt the tug of the chalice once again, but he would not acknowledge it in front of the Horadrim. “Very well,” he said. “Young Lorath shall be considered an apprentice in the order and will work with the Knights of Westmarch to forge an alliance.” He paused, holding each of their gazes in turn. What he saw there helped his

strength and conviction return. “We will find the tomb of Rakkis. It is here, somewhere below our feet. I am sure of it.”



As it turned out, the search did not take much longer.

At first, the archangel lit blue flames in stone bowls and torches as they went, adding to the strange light that pervaded these ruins, but eventually, they found that the flames were already glowing in the new spaces they entered.

It seemed as if their presence had awakened something ancient after all, Cullen thought. The weight of the air around him pressed on his shoulders, squeezing his lungs as if it might come alive itself and wrap him in giant hands.

Far below the surface, they reached an archway that led to a circular chamber. Directly before them stretched a stone bridge over a deep chasm. The bridge led to a platform with an altar of some kind and continued over the other side and reached another archway in the opposite wall. Darkness loomed beyond.

“The tomb of Rakkis,” Cullen breathed softly. “Incredible.” It did appear to be the resting place of the old king of Westmarch, matching the crude drawings in Korsikk’s journal. The altar was shaped like a sarcophagus. The thought of Zakarum coming through these rooms, carrying the dead in a somber burial procession, and of the bones of Rakkis lying in the silence of the chamber for generations sent a chill through him, although they had already seen plenty of other bones on their way through tonight.

There was new energy among the group, even at this late hour, their exhaustion melting away with the excitement of their find. Shanar touched her fingers to the edge of the altar.

“Not exactly my idea of a peaceful eternal resting place,” she said. But her eyes sparkled as Jacob approached her, and she leaned into him slightly, her soft skin appearing to brush against his hand.

There was nothing more they could do that night, and the energy that had given them all a lift faded swiftly as exhaustion once again set in and the reality of what they still faced came back to them. The Horadrim returned through the empty and silent passages toward the surface and passed back through the shimmering wall. As soon as the last person stepped through, the shimmering ceased and the wall of the cavern was smooth and unmarked, and the stone statue once again followed Tyrael with its cold, lifeless eyes as they left.

So it is true, Cullen thought, much as I suspected. The shield remains

intact. It gave him little comfort when he knew what they now had to face.

They took the other fork in the path to see where it led. Sure enough, the cavern ascended quickly to the surface, and they emerged through a natural formation of rock and a carefully constructed entrance at the edge of a great bog some distance from the city. It looked like nothing more than the ruins of an ancient and long-forgotten temple. Their luck had held, and they would not have to test the rock bridge after all.

The tall spires of Westmarch twinkled in the distance, touched by the rising sun. The smell of sulfur and mud was strong, and the sounds of frogs and other marsh creatures broke the early-morning quiet.

“A perfectly concealed lair,” Thomas said. “No one would suspect what lies beneath these waters.”

Indeed, when Cullen turned to look at the place where they had emerged, he saw nothing but crumbling stone among the weeds and thrushtails. Even if someone wandered into the catacombs below, they would never find the hidden key slot and shielded wall that led to the nephalem’s sanctuary. For that was how he had begun to think of it, not as a city but as a second sanctuary hidden within the first, a place that remained protected much as Sanctuary itself had been protected from the Heavens and the Hells by the Worldstone.

Of course, that protection hadn’t lasted, he thought. The demons had found a way in, as had angels. Sanctuary had been corrupted, and innocence was lost long ago. Would this place be any different, once they had brought the stone here?

A mournful call drifted out over the murky waters and echoed through the woods, a chilling sound like the cry of the dead. Some kind of bird, perhaps, or other animal. But it served to punctuate their moods as they made their way around the worst of the swamp toward Westmarch.

As exhausted as they were, none of them was likely to sleep much today, Cullen thought, afraid of what dreams might come.

Chapter Twenty-Four



The Calm before the Storm

Lorath led them back to the Inn of the Snapping Dog, where despite Cullen's worries, they did indeed sleep through the day like the dead. That night, when they awoke, a raucous celebration by the knights in the tavern below was in full swing. The Horadrim were welcomed for the most part by the revelers, as full of drink and good spirits as they were. The group's role in the siege had already spread through the ranks, and the knights were curious about them, although Zayl received a number of looks and muttered words from those who were less hospitable to spellcasters of the dark arts.

In spite of the Horadrim's misgivings, all of them took some food and drink, except for the necromancer, who continued to be distracted by the possible nearby presence of the so-called phantoms, as he confided in Mikulov in a place by the door, far enough away from the noise for them to talk freely. Zayl spoke of a disturbance in the Balance and the restlessness of those long departed from this world, which he could sense like the murmur of a crowd in the background.

Zayl slipped away shortly after to walk the streets, and the monk would have accompanied him, but he was concerned with other things at the moment. Jacob and Shanar had retired to a table together, their heads bent close, the conversation quite intimate. Gynvir stood apart from them and appeared to be stricken with something physically painful; Mikulov had little experience with affairs of the heart, but from the way she looked at her two friends, it seemed obvious that she had strong feelings for Jacob that were tearing at her insides like a knife.

Ordinarily, Mikulov would have considered this none of his business, but in this case, a rift between them could have a direct impact on the mission. He resolved himself to watch them closely. Perhaps Tyrael should be made aware of it, he finally decided.

But when Mikulov went to look for the archangel, he was gone.



Tyrael slipped away unnoticed from the Snapping Dog, leaving the warm light from the lanterns and the raucous voices behind and entering the dark city streets.

It was time to consult the chalice. He had waited long enough.

What did it matter that the others wasted precious hours in the tavern, rather than preparing themselves to storm the Heavens? The responsibility for this plan was his. And he needed the wisdom that would come to him from Chalad'ar—in particular, insights into Shanar's role in the deception and whether it had the slightest possibility of succeeding.

He had awoken that evening with every muscle on fire. He felt every step, every breath, like a hot iron dragged across his chest. His skin itched with need for the chalice, his fingers trembling to hold it. When he was buried within its depths, he felt like an angel again. And yet he remembered what the chalice had brought the last time, the feelings of horror, hopelessness, and loss.

What was Chalad'ar doing to him? What were its effects on flesh and bone? It had never been meant for a mortal.

But the thirst was too strong to ignore.

The streets immediately outside the inn contained too many people, the noise of the city as it settled too much for him to bear. Tyrael wandered farther away, into an area of Westmarch that he hadn't seen. He found a place off the street where a fountain had once spouted but was now dry and cracked, near a building that was crumbling and dark. A man huddled there in rags, muttering; when Tyrael entered the courtyard, he heaved himself to his feet and stumbled away, the smell of mead wafting in his wake.

When Tyrael removed Chalad'ar and peered into the chalice, a wave of relief washed across his aching bones. His mind drifted away from his physical form, leaving it slumped on the cracked and broken flagstones as he soared through singing strands of light and emotion. Almost immediately, he sensed a presence watching him, but this time, it felt soothingly familiar. *This is where you belong.* And yet he could not completely turn away from another voice, one that came from within and warned him that what he was doing could be the end of him.

As if in answer, the pools to which he was connected began to change, and the light wrapped itself around him in a suffocating, tangled mat. Whispers came from every direction, paranoia and fear and rage dominating them all.

A sense of darkness and corruption grew stronger. The archangels were gathering against him. Imperius had sent the Sicarai to destroy him and his team, and it was only a matter of time until he tried again. The Council had found him too easily. Did he have a traitor in his midst, and if so, would that destroy any chance Tyrael had in orchestrating the bold deception he had planned?

The monk had been watching him carefully, had spied on him in the woods and always seemed to be eyeing him. Perhaps it was indeed

Mikulov, and he had been leading the phantoms to them all along. Or Jacob, who had been touched by one and still bore the mark of the creatures on his shoulder. Or even the necromancer, who seemed to know so much about the Balance between light and dark and was always nearby, lurking in the shadows like a phantom himself.

But it mattered little in the end, as long as Tyrael brought the stone back with him to Sanctuary. He had been wasting time. Many lives would be lost in the fight, just as many lives had been sacrificed before for the greater good. The stone's corruption of the High Heavens was accelerating, and he was determined to do whatever it took to succeed in his mission.



Sometime later, Tyrael came to his senses sitting crookedly against the broken fountain. Shadows danced around the empty courtyard as the clouds played across a pregnant moon.

His lips were chapped, his throat dry. His limbs trembled with exhaustion as he forced his way to his feet.

Chalad'ar was sitting on its side a short distance from him. Momentary panic filled his thoughts at the idea that someone might have stolen it while he was asleep. The chalice was his and his alone. He was the only one who could peer into its depths and return with his mind intact. Its insights must remain with him.

Tyrael scooped up the chalice and returned it to his pocket, and relief washed over him. He glanced at each corner of the courtyard, searching for anyone who might be watching. But nothing moved, and after some time, he trudged slowly in the direction of the Inn of the Snapping Dog, full of a swirling, grasping darkness that was his and his alone.

PART THREE



Rise of the Nephalem

Chapter Twenty-Five



The Wastelands

The archangel of Wisdom stood on an endless plain of stone, dusty and cracked. His arms were pinned by a wrap of thorns that pierced his flesh and drew blood, which trickled hotly down his sides. He was naked, his mortal flesh shriveled and sagging, white and a marbled blue.

The angels surrounded him and the altar, upon which lay the child.

It was a boy; that much was apparent, although his age was difficult to say. Spikes had been driven through his wrists and ankles, nailing him to the black stone, bled white like an alabaster statue. He was human and familiar, although Tyrael could not fathom why he was here.

The archangel looked around, trying to see through the forest of angels that stood still and silent and cold, an execution squad doubling as witnesses to mark the boy's passing. Beyond them, Tyrael could see the remains of the Pools of Wisdom, crumbling to dust. This was Heaven, and yet it was not; it was a once-familiar world seen through the eyes of a stranger.

A prodding forced him forward. He stumbled, nearly falling to his knees. He turned back for a moment, just long enough to catch a glimpse of Imperius directly behind him. The archangel of Valor was drenched in blood. Imperius gestured with his weapon. They wanted him to look at the boy, see what had been done to him.

Dark tendrils emerged from the cracked ground beneath the altar. They slithered up the side of the black rock, hugging its glittering facets, setting off pulses of bloody, glowing light. The tendrils wrapped themselves around the boy, and as they slid into place, he opened his eyes.

There was something familiar about him. Tyrael moved closer, shuffling against his thorny bonds, aware of his nakedness and the angels watching. He looked upon the face of Jacob. His eyes were wide with pain, his mouth open as if to scream, as a squirming black strand wriggled down his throat. Jacob arched upward in agony as Tyrael's bonds fell away, disappearing into the stone. Tyrael looked down; he held a hammer and a spike in his bloody hands, and he raised the spike and placed it against Jacob's chest.

When he glanced up again, Jacob's face had changed, and the archangel found himself peering into eyes identical to his own.



Tyrael sat upright on his straw mattress, sweat coating his skin. Faint

gray light filtered into the room through the window as morning broke across the city of Westmarch. The dream clung to him like cobwebs, the ache in his skull compounded by images of Jacob as a child sprawled across the black altar and his own face upon the slab.

Death comes for you all, and it comes upon dark wings.

In the silence of the early dawn, Tyrael was afraid of his own mind's betrayal. Afraid he was not strong enough to lead these people through the blinding light. This week, they would continue their preparations, culminating with an exploratory journey beyond the borders of Sanctuary. Tyrael had described some of the dangers they might face, but he had to give them a taste of it in person. It was the only way, and time was running short.

They had come too far to turn back now.

He glanced at the others in the room. Cullen and Thomas slept peacefully, but the monk's bed was empty, as it had been every morning since they had taken the rooms at the Snapping Dog. Mikulov did not seem to have much need of sleep, but he would always return perfectly calm and rested, seemingly refreshed, from wherever he had gone.

Tyrael set his shoulders and put his darker thoughts and burdens away. He dressed quietly, then woke the others as dawn broke fully and strands of bright light burst through the clouds, painting the city in sharp blacks and whites.



Mikulov stood upon the ramparts of the city walls as the sun came up, drenching Westmarch with light. With dawn came renewal, energy, fresh life. The breath of the gods was contained in the breeze that caressed his skin, their warmth cradled in the sun's rays. No visions had come to him this morning, and he wondered about the meaning of such silence but did not question it. The gods would provide for him, when the time was right.

The monk climbed directly over the wall, flexing his muscles from slight handhold to handhold as he moved quickly down the nearly smooth stone. The city guards did not see him, nor did anyone on the streets. He was careful this way not to raise the alarm.

He had spoken to Tyrael about his concern over Jacob, Shanar, and Gynvir. The archangel had appeared to take it in, but the monk had the sense that something else was distracting him, and it wasn't the impending invasion of the High Heavens. Tyrael's plan for stealing the Black Soulstone was surprising, but although the odds of success were

incredibly long, Mikulov could find little in it that he would improve.

Tyrael had outlined the plan to the rest of the group several days before, drawing diagrams in the dust as they gathered once again among the catacombs. The timing was crucial. They would have to understand the realms of the Heavens and how they related to one another in order to make it through. Each realm would bring its own set of dangers, and if they wanted to survive, they would need to realize that beauty often led to ugliness and horror. Angels were not their friends, and they did not offer protection; in this case, they were as dangerous as the denizens of the Burning Hells, perhaps more so, because they would strike from behind a curtain of blinding light and majesty.

Mikulov moved quickly through the streets as the city awakened, passing citizens of Westmarch going to their places of business, unaware of the drama unfolding in their midst. What worried him now was Tyrael's state of mind. The archangel was conflicted, and it had something to do with the object he carried. The monk had a sense that it was an object of great power, but it brought a darkness that chilled his blood. That, along with the tension between Jacob and the two women and Gynvir's continued distrust of the necromancer, was the greatest risk they faced.

Mikulov sensed that there was something else about Tyrael's plan that haunted him, but if the archangel was hiding a deeper truth, he would not say. The monk knew one thing for certain: together they had a chance. But without focus and trust in one another and a leader who believed in their success, the quest to steal the Black Soulstone would be very short, indeed.



Tyrael took them through the bog and back to the tomb, past echoing halls covered with strange and unknowable carvings of gigantic faces and pits filled with bones, as if the nephalem of old had simply dropped dead where they stood and rotted until their flesh was gone. The floors were made of beautiful blocks of stone, sometimes set in patterns with some purpose lost to time. In other places, the floors had crumbled away, leaving a jagged hole that revealed levels below.

Jacob walked close to Shanar. Her scent was light and clean, and he felt a strange surge of passion for her, strong enough to make him blush. Every sense was suddenly heightened. She was sending more mixed signals lately, warm one moment and cool the next, and his head swam with emotions. He was well aware of Gynvir's jealousy,

although whether it was because of her own feelings for him or simply because she was left out, he did not know.

“Tonight we will conduct our first true test,” Tyrael said, after they had once again reached the tomb. “But before that, an order of business. You will face extreme emotional and spiritual stress during our mission and truly long odds. Some of us—perhaps all—will lose our lives.” He looked around at all of them. “I am giving you one more chance to leave now, before it is too late. After this, there is no turning back.”

Jacob glanced at the others. Nobody moved, although he sensed uneasiness in Shanar, and Thomas had turned pale, his forehead slick with sweat.

The moment stretched as Tyrael continued to study them. “Very well,” he said finally. “We have made strides together, strengthened ourselves for the great challenge ahead. You have gained confidence through our prior skirmishes and our successes. But hear this: the Heavens are like nothing you have ever experienced before. Tonight I will give two of you a taste of what will come.”

Tyrael directed them into smaller groups. Thomas, Cullen, Gynvir, and Mikulov would remain in the chamber, refining the plan to reach the soulstone, familiarizing themselves with exact pathways and obstacles, and learning to navigate through the halls of the Heavens as quickly and efficiently as possible. Cullen had a detailed drawing of the Heavens’ realms, and Tyrael had pointed out a few minor mistakes. They would use Cullen’s knowledge and brains, Thomas’s skills in battle tactics, and Mikulov’s and Gynvir’s strengths in combat and stealth to settle every possible detail and lead the rest of them through.

Working alone and in the quiet of another abandoned chamber nearby, Zayl would focus on the transportation of the stone itself, beginning his construction of the satchel that would contain the great power held within it, at least for a short period of time. The realm of the dead would help channel some of its corruptive forces, and he would use all of his gifts as a necromancer to keep the others safe.

“Jacob and Shanar,” Tyrael said. “Come with me. You will be the first to experience the Wastelands.”



Tyrael took them into a secluded area farther away from the others, a room filled with the blue glow of the nephalem torches. In centuries past, both the Hells and the Heavens had used the Pandemonium

Fortress, a structure Tyrael himself had helped construct around the Worldstone, as a staging ground for their attacks on Sanctuary. But that was now abandoned and could not be reached through a portal.

The Wastelands, however, a murky world on the fringes of Pandemonium itself, were accessible to them. "It is a realm impossible to explain," Tyrael said. "The Wastelands are like the center of Creation itself. They are constantly shifting and changing. What you see and experience one day may be completely different on another. There is no true matter there, no substance. You may hear or feel things that do not make sense, and those who are not prepared may become lost forever. Imagine being cast into the depths of the ocean, down where no light can penetrate, tossed about by the movements of the water. It is a dangerous and frequently misunderstood place, even by the angels."

Shanar glanced at Jacob and shifted on her feet, looking uncomfortable. Tyrael took a small object from his robes and placed it on the ground. He drew a symbol around it and spoke strange words Jacob did not understand. A portal sprang to life, emitting a fierce glow that expanded rapidly into a shimmering plane of light.

"I'll go first," Jacob said, meaning to take the lead, but Tyrael stopped him.

"We go together," he said.

Shanar clasped Jacob's hand. As they stepped through the portal, a surge of crackling energy enveloped them. Jacob was immediately disoriented, floating unmoored from his body, all five senses refusing to cooperate, while every ounce of his mind screamed *danger*. The wave of vertigo, dread, and panic that came over him was almost too much to bear; he found himself floating in the void, like death in the wind, a whirling vortex of pure, soundless fury that threatened to consume his very essence.

Just do what you must, and do it quickly.

His father's voice came to him, as loud and clear as if he stood alive nearby, strong as the entire world to a small boy who was still finding his way within it.

Put aside any joy or lust for glory. Think only of the duty you fulfill.

With a tremendous force of will, Jacob remembered what his father had taught him: the importance of justice without rage, reasoned argument and judgment, and bloodshed only when there was no other choice. He struggled to find himself in the waves that battered him back and forth. Dimly, he began to sense his physical form again: his flesh cold and aching, a dull rushing sound like water in his ears, and the pressure of Shanar's hand in his own.

He could hear her calling him. He followed the voice, suddenly yanked through an ice-cold wall of mist and into some form of reality.

They were standing on a giant stone plain that stretched out in all directions, the horizon an unbroken gray line. Shanar was watching him. Her shape faded in and out, outline becoming blurred before snapping back again, like hallucinations bleeding through a haze of smoke.

“The outer limits of Pandemonium are more difficult to navigate for those nephalem who have experienced a transformation,” Tyrael said, stepping out from nothingness to take shape. His voice was muffled, as if he were speaking underwater. “Your power lies in controlling your emotions—and the key to unlocking that power also serves as your greatest weakness.”

Shanar’s voice came as if from within his own mind. “Feelings are messy things. I’ve given them up.”

“You hide behind humor,” Tyrael said. “Your abilities are considerable but could be so much more. You must let go of your resistance and learn how to harness what you feel, overcoming your fear to amplify your natural strength. Shanar, you will play one of the most important roles in our plans—and one of the most difficult. I must ask you to do something no human has ever done before.”

Tyrael drew his sword. El’druin burned like a torch in the faint light, and the sword sang as he wielded it from hand to hand. Shanar let out a gasp, and Jacob felt her hand tighten in his own.

The resonance was achingly beautiful. “You recognize the sword’s song,” Tyrael said. “You have heard it before.”

“It called me to that cave years ago,” Shanar said. “I followed the call . . . and I met you.” She glanced at Jacob again, squeezed his fingers, and released them.

“And now you must answer it.” Tyrael swung the blade again, and the song reverberated through the Wastelands, bringing tears to Jacob’s eyes. It was something he could not possibly describe and nothing that could have been created on Sanctuary, but he knew it well. This was the weapon he had carried for all those years, one that had become a part of him. He longed to hear more of it.

“Answer the sword, Shanar,” Tyrael said. His voice had grown more commanding. “Let it flow from you. The angelic resonance from the Arch flows through all things and can shape the paths of both humans and angels. You know this—you, of all mortals, understand it. Now you must reflect it back.”

Shanar closed her eyes. A low moan escaped her lips. A tingling sensation flowed through her fingers and into Jacob’s own, and a vibration began, faint at first and then louder. Soon it became painful, and Jacob released his grip, spinning away from her into the fog, becoming untethered from any physical place. He fought to get back to the sound, but now there were two songs from two distinct

locations. He pushed through, grasping at swirling ghosts that dissipated with his touch. Shapes appeared through the fog. An angelic being, its wings open, resonating with the sword. No, not an angel.

Shanar.

The wizard had her arms outstretched, her head thrown back. Energy crackled from her fingertips like angel wings, and the song that poured from her was identical to the sword's resonance.

Jacob saw Tyrael stride forward through the fog, El'druin above his head. "The Heavens will reveal things you do not want to see, and you must not doubt or hesitate in order to survive."

Without warning, Tyrael brought the sword down in a whistling slash toward Shanar's throat.

Jacob had the Hallowed Destroyer out before he realized what he had done, meeting the strike and parrying it in the flash of a second. Sparks flew in the strange, glowing mist, and Tyrael's form rippled like melting glass before disappearing into the vast, endless plain.

The two of them stood alone, listening to the howl of wind. Shanar was shaking. Jacob slipped back through time, felt his blade sliding into his father's hot flesh. El'druin had forged him into an instrument of Justice, and the pain and guilt over what he had done had been removed from him. But it had come back again this past year, like a creeping sickness, and he had lost sight of what he knew.

No more, he thought. The weapon that had been forged for him had brought back his strength and his confidence, had given him the abilities to become an instrument of Justice once again, just as his father had long ago, before the plague had twisted him with evil and madness.

But something else still nagged him, something he had gotten wrong.

The thought was swept away in an instant. Someone was watching them. He felt it like blades boring into the back of his skull. Jacob searched the mist that swirled again around him. But he could see nothing, and as Shanar came back into focus, he spotted the glowing shroud of the portal behind them. The feeling dissipated like a nightmare banished by the morning sunlight.

As he passed through to the other side, the scar on his shoulder throbbed dully, a question mark burned into his skin.

Chapter Twenty-Six



Attack at the Bog

Sometime after the battle for the Church of the Holy Order, their brothers arrived from Gea Kul, twelve of them brought by the messenger Lorath had sent. It was a smaller group than they had hoped it would be. The Horadrim had begun disappearing under strange circumstances, the new arrivals explained, and their ranks had been depleted. Some of the remaining members reported seeing creatures that kept to the shadows and vanished when confronted. The Horadrim had not been able to find any traces of the missing, and other than a handful left behind to guard their library and artifacts, these twelve were all who remained.

Thomas, Cullen, and Mikulov seemed to take the news hard. They had known several of the brothers well. The disappearances certainly appeared to be similar to what had happened to the people of Bramwell. But there was nothing they could do from so far away, and in spite of their questions, their brothers from Gea Kul could tell them nothing more.

Still, the newly arrived Horadrim added numbers to their ranks. They knew next to nothing of what they faced and would provide precious little support against the army of the Heavens, Jacob thought. But their purpose was not to go through the portal. They would remain in Sanctuary and stand guard against any attack while the others were gone.

And there were enemies nearby; of that Jacob was certain. He felt them in the pulse of the puckered scar near his throat, like the touch of the dark-winged creature that had seared it into his flesh, a pulse that had grown stronger since he had passed through the Wastelands. That night in Tristram seemed so long ago, and he had already changed so much, but the touch had followed him every step of the way.

The phantoms were somewhere near, biding their time. For what, Jacob could not say.



They intensified their efforts.

Tyrael took the rest of them through the Wastelands, testing their nerves and abilities to the breaking point, forcing them to adjust to

the very personal ghosts they found there. When they spoke about the experience, each reported a different environment; some floated in the dark while screams and moans and strange sounds assaulted them, while others could see colors and shapes but heard nothing at all.

Mikulov stood on an empty plain that slowly gained the shapes of mountains and jungle. Ivgorod assassins stalked him through the thick foliage, their eyes boring into his soul. He crept forward with nothing for cover, and the jungle dissolved into the ragged cavern walls of the Burning Hells, where demons waited to consume him. Cullen relived the fall of the Black Tower, the undead rising up from the ground and dragging him down. Gynvir took on the hordes overcome by the rage plague, her own brothers and sisters drowning in a sea of blood.

They fought hard against these visions, steeling themselves against the emotions each invoked.

“Your abilities are all drawn from the same source,” Tyrael told them. “Those of you who have shown the strength to bend the elements, tap into magic, wield spells, and slay demons in Sanctuary have already learned to harness some of your nephalem powers and can do so much more, if given the chance. You have felt the breaking of emotions within you, an awakening of the blood that will allow you to reach new heights. Now, harness them and control them, for they will be used against you in the realms of the Heavens.”

He worked even harder with Shanar, helping her continue to focus her abilities and mimic the angelic resonance as closely as possible. She hadn’t quite forgiven him for his sudden attack during their first trip to the Wastelands, but he had explained that she had never been in any real danger, and it had been for Jacob’s benefit, not hers; Jacob had to trust his own instincts again, and that was a place to begin.

Lorath Nahr observed all this with wonder and served them ably as a liaison between the Horadrim and the knights, bringing nourishment and keeping an account of the events as they unfolded. He was also eager to learn and showed some early promise in manipulating the elements as Mikulov worked with him in the moments when the formal training was over. The young knight and the monk had swiftly developed a bond, and Mikulov’s patience with Lorath’s questions and general eagerness seemed endless.

Commander Nahr had arrived from Bramwell and had been working around the clock in a local blacksmith’s shop in Westmarch, pushing himself to the point of collapse. And Zayl’s satchel was complete. Once exposed to the stone, the necromancer explained, the satchel would expand to carry it, but it would only protect them for a few minutes before the spell began to break down.

Finally, it was time to put their plans in motion.



The night before the attack, Tyrael lay in the bed of straw, unable to sleep. His mind was spinning, putting one scenario after another, imagining things that could go wrong and how he could fix them; all the long hours, the painful separation from his brothers and sisters, his mortal body's failings, had led up to this.

The archangel of Wisdom remembered his brother's words that day after the Council meeting. *And once again, you have chosen to stand with Sanctuary. If the Council votes to destroy it and eliminate the threat it holds for the Heavens once and for all, will you remain with the world of men and perish with them?*

Imperius was wrong, Tyrael thought. It was not about choosing one over the other. He would lead the Horadrim and try to save both worlds he had come to love. Uldyssian's sacrifice centuries ago came back to him, a memory untarnished by time. It was the moment Tyrael had begun to fully realize mankind's potential for salvation. The good in humans could triumph over darkness, no matter what the odds.

He counted on that now. His team was as ready as it would ever be and needed to rise above the temptations and the horrors that would come. Surely mankind was capable of greatness. And yet in the back of his mind, he also remembered Zoltun Kulle, a founding member of the Horadrim and a man who had let himself be corrupted by darkness. The Black Soulstone was his creation.

Kulle had been human, too.

Tyrael had his own temptations. Before the sun came up over Westmarch, he could wait no longer. Feeling like a failure, he removed the chalice and lost himself in its depths.



They set off before dawn, heading away from the city. The knights had been told of their departure so the city guard would not raise an alarm at the sight of people in heavy cloaks moving through the streets, and General Torion was amenable to it. But the Horadrim did not want the people of Westmarch to encounter them as the shopkeepers and errand boys began their day. They would avoid the Church of the Holy Order and the broken underground bridge, which was impassable, entering the catacombs through the bog.

The Horadrim's bulky robes hid thicker frames. Commander Nahr had done a fine job with what he had been given, although the effort and speed at which he had worked his own magic with the forge had very nearly killed him. But to Mikulov, the clever disguise he wore felt heavy and strange. As a monk, he was used to lighter garments and unrestricted movement, and he wondered what it would be like in combat, should their mission come to that.

"Would you truly not allow me to accompany you after proving my worth this past week?"

Lorath Nahr spoke in low tones as they walked in single file through the treacherous terrain, thirty of them in all, Tyrael in the lead. Lorath had recruited several knights to accompany them and stand guard outside the catacombs' entrance. Mikulov was slightly ahead of the young man, and the monk was only half listening as Lorath pleaded his case for being part of the team that invaded Heaven's realms. Lorath was not ready, and the monk had other concerns.

Mikulov did not like the feel of the dark encroaching upon them. They walked without torches, trusting the moonlight to help them avoid the thick clumps of bog grass and soft spots within the weeds. The gods lived in all things, and tonight their voices spoke of danger.

The tension among the Horadrim had been growing steadily as they skirted the bog's edge. "Hush," Mikulov said, as Lorath began to speak again. "Listen to the—"

Without warning, a great black shape swept in from the left.

The creature moved so quickly there was no time to react. Scuttling forward like a spider, its wings extended like spears, it struck one of the new arrivals from Gea Kul with a vicious and deadly blow.

The man was impaled through the throat.

He made a small gurgling sound as blood gushed down, and the creature swept him into an embrace like a hunter with its prey, disappearing into the dark.

The attack had lasted mere seconds, and most of the Horadrim hadn't even seen it. But Mikulov was only steps behind, and even as he raised the alarm with a shout, he was already sprinting toward where the creature had vanished.

As he skirted a place where the ground turned to a pool of murky water, he heard another cry of pain as Tyrael began barking orders at his team. Another dark shape had swept in like a demon and grabbed a knight with talon-like claws, gutting him with a smooth, vicious yank downward that sliced through the man's cloak and what lay beneath it like butter. Entrails spilled in a hot gush over the swamp grass as the knight was dragged into the trees.

An ambush. Mikulov paused, searching the dark, but he could see

nothing except the faint shapes of the gently waving grasses and trees nearby, and the gods did not speak to him. There was no sign of the creatures or the men they had stolen away.

He turned back toward the others as crackling light burst from Shanar's hands, arching over their heads. The landscape was laid bare and bright for a few moments; movement came from all around them, a dizzying whirl of darting shapes too fast to follow as the creatures retreated from the light. Phantoms. They were impossible to count. But there were many, the monk thought. Far too many.

Men were screaming.

Another man was yanked backward into the trees, and another. None had the chance to strike a single blow. The slaughter was relentless, the phantoms moving too fast. Their original group of eight was far more prepared than the rest and managed to hold the creatures at bay, but the new arrivals and the Knights of Westmarch were helpless against such an overwhelming force.

As Mikulov entered the fray, a blinding flash erupted nearby, and the Sicarai stepped forth from the portal, awash in the glory of his battle armor, fully restored and magnificent. The destroyer searched the marshy ground for a moment, and then, fixing upon Tyrael where he stood with El'druin drawn, he gave a howl of rage and charged forward into battle.



Tyrael silently cursed himself as the dark-winged creatures snatched more of his men. Something had him in its grip, and he could not escape it. His head felt filled with cotton, his movements too sluggish. He should have been ready, but instead, he had let his wandering mind get away from him. The phantoms had been lying in wait, of course, probably had planned it all along, and now, just moments from their destination, the Horadrim were in trouble.

"Reveal yourselves!" Tyrael shouted. Under the light from Shanar's starburst, the Horadrim pulled off their cloaks. Beneath them were the replicas of Luminarei armor Commander Nahr had created for them based on Tyrael's detailed drawings. The armor was so good that even he had trouble telling it from the real thing, at least from a distance. It would not hold up to close scrutiny by the angels in the Heavens, but it might buy them some time.

He hadn't wanted to show his hand, not until just before they passed through the portal. But they had to be able to move freely now, or they would be slaughtered.

“Go!” he shouted at the others. “Get them to the entrance, Jacob! They cannot follow us through the wall!”

The knights loosed arrows at dark shapes that flitted in the shadows. Jacob led the Horadrim and Lorath Nahr through the tall weeds, Thomas and Cullen taking up the rear. Mikulov circled to protect them against any more creatures that might dart in and try to steal away another from among them. Shanar’s crackling bolts of energy kept the phantoms from the skies above their heads.

Tyrael waited to see that they had reached the opening that led to the catacombs before he turned to face the Sicarai.

The archangel was not often intimidated in battle. But the destroyer was a horrifying sight, even larger than before, glowing a fierce red and wielding a new double-bladed weapon that sang like the pulse of blood in his ears.

The Sicarai bore down without hesitation, and Tyrael barely got El’druin up before the destroyer’s blow nearly shattered the blade.

He stumbled backward, aware of the dangers lurking somewhere in the darkness behind him. Another blow rained down, and another; again and again, the destroyer swung on him, and each time, Tyrael managed to deflect the blade just before it bit down into his flesh. But he was tiring quickly, and there were no enemies to hide behind, no tricks to distract his foe. He was alone.

The Sicarai spread his wings and screamed, and the flare of red light from the crackling strands nearly blinded Tyrael. He blinked furiously against the spots dancing before his eyes, trying to locate the next blow before it landed. A soft spot in the bog behind him sucked against his foot and sent him sprawling on his back in the muck as the destroyer’s blade traced a line down his chest. The fierce blow sliced through his armor and drew blood before it clanged off something harder than iron. The chalice.

Pain blossomed wetly. He rolled just as the Sicarai slammed his sword against the ground where he lay, but there was no way to avoid the next blow. The sky had begun to glow with the soft light of early dawn as the destroyer raised his weapon once more, standing for a brief moment in triumph above Tyrael’s prone form.

Is this how it ends? he thought wearily. Blood pulsed from his wound. *Will I die here, in the muck of a forgotten land, before we have even truly begun?*

A slim, dark form with a pale face like a moon slipped over him as the Sicarai struck. The necromancer met the sword with a burst of brilliant orange sparks that showered over Tyrael where he lay. The impact deflected the weapon, and the Sicarai screamed again, this time in fury.

Zayl darted away out of reach, and the Sicarai turned to follow.

Tyrael managed to regain his feet. Searing pain shot across his chest as he stumbled toward the entrance to the catacombs. He heard the Sicarai coming, but he was almost there, just a few more steps . . .

The world began to fade. Phantoms swept in from both sides, black shapes barely visible in the early dawn light. Tyrael's arms were like lead, his every movement an overwhelming effort, and as he felt himself collapse, he was lifted up as if by a breath of wind and carried into the darkness of the tunnel that led far below their feet.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



The Catacombs

Jacob left Lorath Nahr at the entrance to stand guard and led the others through the faintly lit tunnel. They did not speak a word; everyone was grim-faced and in shock at the speed of the attack. He didn't know how many they had lost. It was a miracle that they weren't all dead.

Tyrael was still out there alone against the destroyer. Jacob almost turned back, but he knew his responsibility was to get the rest of the group to safety. Lorath would warn them if danger approached. Anger flared within him, and he quickly pushed it away. His father would not have approved. *Never think your anger makes you unbeatable.*

"Where's the necromancer?"

Gynvir's voice echoed through the silence. She was breathing hard. Jacob looked back through the gloom and did not see Zayl anywhere. Cullen was already working at the key slot, opening the entrance and allowing the others to go through.

"You've been complaining about him since Tristram," Shanar said. "Now you're worried?"

"He has the satchel," the barbarian said. "We can't bring the stone back without it."

A moment later, two figures shuffled into sight around the bend. Zayl had his arm around Tyrael's waist, and the archangel's head slumped loosely forward. His armor had been split open, his chest slick with blood.

Mikulov rushed to help them as a war cry came from somewhere beyond. The Sicarai was close; whether he could enter the tunnel or not was unclear, but if so, they had to hope Lorath could distract him. Jacob had to get everyone through the wall and close the entrance before it was too late.

Zayl and Mikulov reached them, completely supporting the archangel's weight now, and slipped through the shimmering wall. Jacob waited for Shanar and Gynvir to step through, took one last look up the tunnel, and then followed.

Inside they laid Tyrael on the stone floor of the large room, in front of the steps that led down to the lower levels. The blue light from the torches played about their worried faces as the necromancer bent over the archangel, gently separating his armor where it had been slashed and exposing a nasty gash about eight inches long.

Blood oozed from the wound. Quickly, Zayl set aside several vials and packets from his pouch and began to sprinkle their contents

across Tyrael's chest, chanting softly. After a few moments, he waved a gloved hand slowly over the gash and closed his eyes, his face going ash gray. When he removed his hand, the wound had sealed itself, an alabaster scar like a worm across Tyrael's flesh.

Finally, the necromancer shook his head, looking drained and barely able to speak. "Something protected him from a fatal blow," he said. "Something stronger than armor." He touched an object that gleamed like strange metal. "But he has lost much blood. My magic can heal wounds and give him some strength back, but there is not much more I can do for that."

"Help me to my feet," Tyrael said. He had opened his eyes, and his voice was rough with the pain but firm. He pushed Zayl's hand away and tucked the metal object deeper inside his armor, then stood upright, assisted by the others. He winced but set himself and looked around at the grim faces of the Horadrim gathered before him.

"The Sicarai will raise an alarm since we have escaped his ambush, and our mission depends on us infiltrating the Heavens in secret," Tyrael said. "Even now, the ceremony of the Ascension—the rise of the new angel—will begin in the Halls of Valor. Our window is short."

"But you're too weak," Shanar said. "You're not going to be able to fight."

"I will live," Tyrael said. "We must go on. This is our only chance."

The others glanced uneasily at one another. "Master Zayl." Humbart's voice spoke up from his pouch. "They should know about our little problem, don't you think?"

"The satchel has been damaged," Zayl said, his face slowly regaining its color. "I used it to block the destroyer's killing blow. Its magic was effective enough for that, but it's diminished now. I do not know how long it will last, but we will not get the stone back to Sanctuary before it degrades completely."

"Then you are at great risk in carrying it," Tyrael said. "The stone's corruptive power will influence you in ways we cannot predict."

"I accepted your mission in New Tristram," Zayl said, "knowing the risks that come with it."

Tyrael studied his face and then nodded. "Good," he said.

"We do not know what strange results may occur with the use of magic in Heaven's realms," Cullen said. "The blood and your wounds will be noticed, and with the damage to the satchel, perhaps we should—"

"They will not challenge me until it is too late," Tyrael said. "I am still an archangel, and those in the Heavens will do well to remember it. We must move. There is no other alternative." He grimaced again, set his mouth in a firm line. "Follow me."

Chapter Twenty-Eight



The Halls of Valor

In the Heavens, the angels had begun to gather for the Ascension.

The main hall in Valor's realm was filled with shifting, murmuring shapes. Auriel and Itherael were with Imperius in his private chambers. Soon they would make their appearance, and the new angel would be welcomed into the ranks as a full member of the Luminare and a Defender of the Arch.

Balzael watched from the shadows above the crowd, standing on a platform that gave him a good view of the sweeping ceremonial hall. Usually when an angel died, another would eventually be born at the Arch to replace it. Such an angel was not an exact replica of the one lost but would join the same Aspect of the Heavens in service to the archangel who ruled it. It was the way of the Heavens, except in a single instance where an angel had been re-formed: Tyrael after the destruction of the Worldstone. Such a thing was unprecedented.

The blindness with which his brothers and sisters offered up their praise to the traditions of the past disgusted him. He was driven by honor and tradition when they were appropriate to advance his own agenda, but there were far too many times when they got in the way of progress.

Take the fate of Sanctuary, for example. The Angiris Council might debate the issue for what would be measured by mortals as weeks, months, even decades, and all the while, the sickness that was mankind spread like a plague and threatened to tip the scales of the Eternal Conflict toward the Hells. Balzael could not afford to wait any longer, nor could the Guardian. They had hoped the Black Soulstone would be enough on its own, but it was time to be more forceful. They would use whatever they needed in order to accomplish their goal.

Regardless of Tyrael's meddling, the soulstone had been created by men, and it would be their undoing.

There was a kind of poetic justice in that.

The murmur of the crowd below was growing in pitch. They watched the archway that led to the hall, waiting for Imperius to make his grand entrance. But Imperius had a flair for the dramatic and would let them wait while he remained in his chambers until the last moment.

The wait was not the issue for Balzael. He sensed something else. There was a strange feeling in the air, a feeling of something important about to happen, and it wasn't the binding of the new angel to the Aspect of Valor.

Where was the Sicarai?

Balzael turned away from the spectacle, the sense of concern growing within him. He had sent the destroyer back to Sanctuary some time ago. It shouldn't have taken him long to deal with Tyrael and his band of humans; his spies had spent a good deal of time learning about this team, watching from afar, getting to know its strengths and weaknesses, the bickering, the human folly of relationships. They had even branded one of them, a link that kept the others tethered to his mortal soul.

And the humans had led them right to the nephalem stronghold, as Balzael had suspected. The Guardian had decided that there could be a use for the stronghold, if they altered their plans. Although it was shielded from all but mortals for now, the Guardian was already working on that particular problem. It would not be long before the stronghold fell.

The rest had been easy. His spies had known exactly where Tyrael's team would be and when, and an ambush should have guaranteed a slaughter. Not that the Sicarai should have had any trouble with such a small group regardless of the circumstances. But Balzael preferred to ensure victory ahead of time, and he expected a detailed report of the carnage his warrior would wreak.

Almost on cue, movement came from the shadows beyond his private balcony. A moment later, the Sicarai stepped forth. His sword was at his side; one edge held a dull haze of blood.

Balzael's pride swelled in his apprentice. He had trained the destroyer well, given him every advantage in the art of battle. He thought again, as he had before: the Sicarai was the perfect weapon.

But the destroyer's words changed everything.

"He has escaped, my lord. We waited for him and his companions at the bog, as you instructed, but they entered the lair before they could be taken."

Balzael's thoughts of victory turned to rage in an instant. His urge to run the Sicarai through with his own weapon was stilled by curiosity. How had they beaten his best soldier a second time?

His aura pulsed once and then settled. "Tell me," he said, aware of the dangerous growl in his voice.

"I wounded him badly. His mortal blood ran thick. But a human used an object infused with magic against me, draining my strength long enough for them to get to the catacombs."

"What object?"

"I do not know. But it repelled my killing blow with a force I did not expect." The Sicarai hesitated, a new sound present in his voice. Could it have been uncertainty? Impossible. "I was held still for a time by invisible hands, and when I was able to break free, they were gone."

We pursued the mortals down the tunnel but could not find them again.”

“They have gone into the city,” Balzael said. “The lost stronghold of the nephalem shields them from you.” He contained his anger, channeled it in a more fruitful direction. They were trapped in there and would have to emerge sooner or later. He knew about the second entrance to the catacombs, but his spies were stationed there and in the bog.

Whatever Tyrael had planned, it would fail. Of that, he was sure . . .

“There is more, my lord. Your soldiers have been monitoring their conversations in secret, and they have learned much through their connection to the man Jacob.”

“What have you learned, Sicarai? Tell me, or lose your miserable life.”

The Sicarai’s next words stopped him short. “We have reason to believe he is coming here, to the Heavens,” the destroyer said. “They plan to steal the stone out from underneath you.”



The way to the Pools of Wisdom was silent and empty. Balzael slipped from the shadows of the columned entrance, rage still coursing through him. How could he have been so blind? He had expected Tyrael to make a move on the Heavens, just not so soon—and he had thought the Sicarai would have slaughtered the entire team before then.

Certain he was alone, he hurried across the crushed stone of the path toward the Fount, aware of the hole where Chalad’ar had been, glaring at him like an eyeless socket. He did not have much time; Imperius and the other archangels would be expecting him at the Ascension. But an emergency meeting with the Guardian was necessary.

The Heavens were not the same since the Prime Evil’s attack—that was an irrefutable fact—but the changes had really begun much earlier than that. The Pools of Wisdom were a casualty of them. A once warm, peaceful realm had turned cold and dead.

But there was life here—one just had to know how to awaken it.

At the Fount, he paused, staring into the dry basin. The light was sharper in the Pools of Wisdom, illuminating everything in stark terms, turning the landscape into black and white. He waited patiently for a long moment, then raised his arms above the basin and spoke.

The dead air nearly swallowed his voice completely. Nothing happened at first, and then a gurgling sound emerged from below, growing louder. A swirling, flickering light began to fill the basin from the bottom up, until it was brimming with colors woven in a web of countless lines, undulating like liquid in motion.

A shudder ran over Balzael as he stared at the mesmerizing pattern, a feeling of dread mixed with anticipation. He had done this before, and it was always the same: it was like the moment he was born at the Arch, a sense of expanding possibilities along with confusion and a pulsing energy that raced through him until he felt invincible. Wisdom was all about understanding the connections that others did not. There was a web underlying everything, a world beneath his own that must be carefully guarded. Knowledge was power, after all, and this sort of power could be very dangerous indeed.

A shape appeared in the flickering light.

At first, there was nothing more than a blob of darkness within the threads, as if a knot had formed at their center. But the shape grew until it nearly filled the basin in front of Balzael. Unlike the constantly moving threads, this was motionless, and it emanated a chilling darkness that brought shadows drifting across the Fount: a hooded figure, its face a black, empty hole.

The Guardian.

A sound like a slow hiss came forth.

"He is coming here, my lord," Balzael said. His eagerness was too obvious, and it shamed him. But he could not help himself. "The Sicarai and our scouts in Sanctuary have confirmed it—"

"Yes," the Guardian said.

"Of course," Balzael said, suddenly uncertain. Had he made some kind of terrible mistake? The Guardian did not speak plainly, and his strange tendencies made him even harder to read. "Tyrael is growing desperate. We will cut him down, as soon as he shows his mortal face —"

"Our plans have changed."

The Guardian did not speak for some time. Balzael waited, knowing well enough that this was his way, and he would continue when he was ready. Eventually, the Guardian shifted, and the slow hiss came again. "Tyrael's efforts provide us with an opportunity."

"I—I do not understand."

"The stone is working too slowly," the Guardian said. "The people of Sanctuary are ripe for an attack. Tyrael's Horadrim must be allowed to take the stone. See what we shall reap."

The Guardian's hooded face rippled and fell away, and Balzael fell inward, tumbling end-over-end into the web of nightmares and horrorscapes. He saw Tyrael and the Horadrim take the stone from the

Heavens, and then it was taken from them just as quickly; he was immersed in fear, drenched in blood, awash in flames; the screams of humankind rose up around him like a symphony, and the Guardian was conducting it with skilled hands, plucking flesh and drumming bone. Sanctuary crackled and crumbled upon itself, until all that was left was the dead silence of empty space.

Balzael floated inside for a while, understanding what must come to be. Connecting the threads, one at a time, with the help of the Guardian. When he came back, the Pools of Wisdom were once again silent. The Fount had gone dead, all traces of the Guardian vanished. But he had shown Balzael the end of Sanctuary, and other things, and the way to victory was clear in his mind. Although Tyrael had gotten the better of him and his Sicarai until now, all was not lost. Far from it; he knew exactly what he needed to do to salvage the situation.

But it would require a carefully orchestrated series of events, and time was very short indeed.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



The High Heavens

Jacob was the first to step through the portal.

He thought he had steeled himself for what was to come, had imagined every possible reaction. But what he felt first surprised him: a physical ache and a thrumming within his very bones like the low, violent rumble of a waterfall somewhere nearby.

He realized he had squeezed his eyes shut against the world shaking itself to pieces beneath his feet. That put him off balance, but it was nothing compared with what he saw when he opened his eyes and looked around.

Jacob now stood on the edge of a vast plain made of light and sound. Light seared his eyes, sparkled like reflections off cut glass. But this light was not warm and friendly. The atmosphere was arid, the air dead and ice-cold. He thought the Wastelands would have prepared him, but no. His ears felt filled with cotton, and his mouth went suddenly dry. Running his tongue across his lips, he could feel every crack. Sweat ran down his neck, made his back crawl. When he blinked, he felt a sandpaper-like grit under his eyelids.

Jacob watched through a watery haze as the others stepped through the portal. They recoiled against the intensity of the light before opening their eyes enough to peer around them. He tried to speak and could not. Everything was larger and more overwhelming than it seemed, each sensation enhanced tenfold until he felt the unbearable weight of it bearing down.

That was when the whispers began.

At first, he thought it was the hiss of something being dragged across rock or perhaps a reptile slithering nearby. He squinted, trying to make out more of his surroundings. Pathways filled with crushed stone wound through the flat plain and led from one jumble to another. Dry stream beds, perhaps. Liquid had run here some time ago, but it was long gone now.

The hissing came again. He looked in all directions, searching for the source, but could not pinpoint it. It began to sound like words in a tongue he did not recognize. The whispers, he thought, might have been trickles of sand or ground crystal sliding down dry channels. They wormed into his brain, began working on him in ways that made him feel as if he was losing control.

Emotions bubbled up within him: fear and regret, sorrow and loss. The sounds of voices receded from him, and the light began to coalesce into bright flares that seemed to time themselves with each

beat of his heart.

Some kind of reflective surface winked nearby. He stepped closer, drawn to it by something he could not place, a need for answers. The surface was a pool of quicksilver surrounded by polished marble. A thrill ran through him. The whispers around him grew again: voices of people from his past, those long dead and gone and haunting him. He felt their losses like little jabbing wounds opening him up and bleeding him out, red streams soaked up by the hungry stone.

When he looked into the reflective surface, death stared back.

His face was a mass of purple and gray gristle and bone. His eyes were gone, replaced by empty holes. His jaw hung loosely from strands of sinew like leather.

Recoiling from the horror, he looked around him and saw skulls everywhere, white bone gleaming, dead sockets of shadow staring lifelessly, jaws half-buried in crystal sands. The remains of friends and loved ones reduced to nothing but cold, empty shells.

Not this . . .

Shanar came to him through frigid air, her lithe form like a mirage. She spoke gibberish as though from a muffled distance, took his face with both hands, drew close.

The touch of her lips was electric, jarring. He was yanked back through himself to this single point, everything else falling away. When it was finally over and she broke free, he was able to find his feet again under him, and this strange new world swam back into focus.

“Don’t get lost,” she whispered, holding his gaze for a moment, her face inches away. “The resonance can draw you away from yourself.”

Jacob nodded, tried to find his voice. Shanar dropped her hands from his face, kept her eyes on him for another moment. “I’m alive,” he said. His lips still burned from her kiss. His throat felt as if he had swallowed sand. But she had done something to him, brought him back to his center of gravity. The light was bearable now, the whispers receding. The ground beneath his feet had stilled.

They stood in a vast room filled with winding beds of crushed, glittering crystal that twisted and turned and dropped like waterfalls into round basins. What he had thought were skulls were actually round chunks of marble worn down over centuries. Magnificent, intricately carved columns rose to support an arched ceiling far above them. The air in here was very still, and Jacob had the sense that it had been this way for some time. A dead and abandoned place.

A fountain nearby had been carved of some kind of material Jacob couldn’t place. What a breathtaking scene this must have been at one time, sparkling liquid spraying up through the fountain’s throat. Yet it, too, was long dead, its basins dry and empty. A depression in the cut

stone made it seem as if an object had once lived there, inserted like a key into a lock, but it was gone now.

He turned back to the others. Gynvir stood staring at a point somewhere beyond him, tears shining on her face. Her gaze flicked to him for a moment, held his own; then she looked away. He did not know if she had peered into the quicksilver mirror, could not read her expression. Had it been the kiss, or had she seen her own death in the reflection?

Shanar spoke softly to Gynvir as the others gathered, gaining their footing. Tyrael was the last through the portal. He was pale, his armor slashed, pain playing across his normally stoic features. What could they possibly accomplish without his strength? Jacob felt infinitesimally small against a vast world beyond these dead walls, facing an army of angels that could crush them in an instant.

It is time for you to lead the others.

It was almost as if Tyrael had spoken inside his head. Fresh doubt crawled inside Jacob.

He was not ready, not yet.

Not for this.



Tyrael saw the uncertainty on Jacob's face. There would be more to come; the Pools of Wisdom were overwhelming enough, but they were nothing compared with the breathtaking beauty of the Gardens of Hope, the majesty of the Courts of Justice, or the sheer power and scope of the Halls of Valor. There were also dark sides to each of these Aspects. The darkness would come whether Tyrael liked it or not, and that would be the true test of their strength.

Exhaustion had seeped deep into Tyrael's bones. Every part of his body ached. The wound across his chest throbbed dully. His knees sent sharp stabs up his legs and through his back. Every step was an ordeal, every breath an acute remembrance of his mortality. He felt disconnected from his brothers and sisters, alone in a world that had rejected him in all his forms, immortal and mortal, light and flesh. He wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep, and if he could not sleep, he wanted to consult the chalice. *Wisdom, insight, answers . .*

The monk touched his arm. He alone seemed nearly unmoved by the spectacle of their surroundings. "We should move quickly," Mikulov said. The others were watching. Tyrael realized his hand had gone to the hidden pocket inside his armor; without a conscious thought, he had been about to draw out Chalad'ar right in front of

them all.

He dropped his hand. The chalice was like a bottomless hole that he tumbled down, losing himself while the Heavens burned. And yet he still wanted it, craved what it brought him: darkness and oblivion.

“Now is the moment when we prove our worth,” he said to the others. “If I am right, we have come when the Luminarei are attending the Ascension. Shanar’s magic will cloak us, and we will move as quickly as we dare and blend in. We must trust that they will not suspect treachery in their own realm. Jacob, lead us to the Gardens of Hope and, from there, through the Courts of Justice. There will be very few angels there, only those who have been left to stand guard. The archangels will be with Imperius in the Halls of Valor preparing to join the ceremony, and that shall give us an advantage as long as we avoid close scrutiny. If all goes well, we will be in the Council chamber before they realize anything is wrong.”

Jacob nodded. He looked pale, his hair damp against his forehead. There were no answers held in the man’s gaze, no hint of what inner strength he might have found. Tyrael turned to the wizard. It was time for her to test every ounce of her abilities; everything now depended on her unique skills.

Shanar took a deep breath, as if steadying herself. When she raised her arms, the energy that sprang from her was breathtaking; it met the light of the Heavens, challenged and absorbed it, encasing them in a bubble of crackling heat, magic that flowed from deep within her and through her fingers with bursts of brilliant color.

Commander Nahr’s Luminarei armor began to glow, the Horadrim’s mortal features masked by glorious light. Their forms grew larger, their bearing more magnificent, the resonance of angels rising from them until their song matched the majesty of the Heavens.

And when she was done, the bubble receding, they all had wings.

Chapter Thirty



The Guard

The Horadrim emerged from the Pools of Wisdom in single file, Jacob in the lead. Outside the pools, the courtyard was empty. The stone boulevard, ten times as wide as any road Jacob had ever seen, was polished to a high shine. It was lined with living structures, trees made of light, and their boughs swayed without any hint of wind. Musical notes came from the movements of the delicate branches, and the sound brought him close to tears. *Song of the Arch*, Tyrael had called it. It was haunting.

Beyond the tallest branches rose the majestic, soaring spires of the Silver City, towering so high they made him dizzy. It was dreamlike, and yet every detail was wrought with a sharpness that spoke of another level of reality, as if Jacob's senses had increased tenfold. His legs began to tremble, and he forced himself to be still, to breathe, to clear his mind of everything other than putting one foot in front of the other.

Don't get lost. The resonance can draw you away from yourself. Shanar's kiss still lingered on his lips, and the ghost of her touch helped him remember.

He glanced back once, and Shanar's talent amazed him: he saw a troop of Luminarei marching in formation, wings undulating and angelic songs resonating wondrously, their bodies appearing to be made of pure light under golden armor and hooded features. Tyrael had made it clear that as good as Shanar could be, the illusion might fool the angels at a distance but would never work up close. The plan hinged on them making it to the Council chamber without interacting directly with anyone. Still, it was remarkable to see. No human had ever been able to mimic an angel's song; no human had ever even understood it.

Jacob felt like a deer stepping delicately through a pack of sleeping wolves. There were so many things they hadn't thought through, so many ways the plan could go wrong. Even if they managed to reach the stone, could there be any hope of returning to the portal with their heads still attached to their shoulders?

He concentrated on their immediate surroundings. Something was wrong with one of the trees; a thin, gray thread had wound its way up and around it, entwining itself with the other strands and running through the thickest branch to the top. To his left, he saw another one with gray woven among the light strands. A deeper chill ran through him. The Black Soulstone had spread its tainted ichor through the

Heavens.

He prayed they were not too late.

A Luminarei guard emerged onto the boulevard some distance in front of them. He did not appear to be paying them any attention yet. But Jacob veered quickly to the right, leading the others off the road and into the trees, where they had some cover.

He could hear someone else coming up behind them.

They were in a pocket of space with some protection on both sides from the trees. He paused, waiting, with the others. They couldn't risk moving until the Luminarei passed on the road.

Instead, he heard one call to the other. "You are late. Balzael will be furious if he catches you." The other said something Jacob could not quite hear. "Better yet," the first said, "come along with me. I was tasked with finding one more to escort Gealith to the Halls of Valor. She has passed through the courts and the gardens and is in the library, making the final rounds."

More from the second guard, and Jacob could hear clearly as he came closer. ". . . cut through the gardens to reach the Halls of Valor more quickly."

"He will see you if you do," the first said. "Come on. You can be my second; Balzael will be none the wiser."

The sounds of the two guards moving away made Jacob sigh with relief, exhaling the breath he had been holding. If the map was correct, the gardens were on the opposite side of these trees. If the guards had come this way . . .

But they had not. The Horadrim's luck had held so far.

Glittering branches of light and sound arched over their heads, the music like a gentle, warm hand against their minds, each pulse of blood synchronized with the notes that washed over them. Before he led them into the gardens, Jacob did a quick head count and came up one short. He did it again, more slowly this time. Seven, including him.

Someone was missing.

With a start, he realized who it was.

The necromancer is gone.

And the satchel, the only way they had to transport the Black Soulstone from the Heavens, had vanished along with him.

Chapter Thirty-One



The Library of Fate

Zayl kept to the cover on the opposite side of the road. The second guard had come from his right, so quickly and so close that the necromancer had been cut off, forced to abandon the others to hide among a much thinner line of trees on the left of the wide boulevard. He had watched, trying to remain still, while the two guards spoke for a moment. He could not risk crossing over, or he would be in plain view. After the guards finished speaking, they began walking up the boulevard, and it was some time before Zayl could cross safely and check on the others. When he had, they were gone.

He had two choices: he could try to follow them, not knowing exactly where they had entered the gardens or how far they might have traveled, and risk drawing more attention to himself and exposing the team; or he could head up the boulevard alone. If he went alone, he could keep to the trees and make his way around the gardens' edge more freely. If the others were discovered, it would give him a second chance at success.

He had always been better alone.

He could sense Humbart fuming beneath the armor, but at least this time, the skull was blessedly silent. What Zayl was doing would quite possibly lead to the end of his time among the living, but there had been no other choice; if that was his destiny, he must embrace it.

Except the satchel must make it to the Council chamber to carry the stone.

Zayl was not afraid of death, but above all else, the mission must not fail. The Balance between light and darkness had to be maintained. He thought back to another confrontation, when he had come face-to-face with a necromancer named Karybdus, who had believed that the light had become too powerful and that darkness must be brought forth through the demon Astrogha. Karybdus had taken the wrong path, but the concept itself was a sound one, according to the beliefs of the priests of Rathma: *maintain the Balance*.

Zayl had always fought for the light, but in the depths of his mind, he had wondered what might happen if he sensed that the side of the angels had become too powerful. Would he turn on them?

Now he had the answer. Sanctuary was also a key part of the Balance. If it was destroyed and the High Heavens became dominant over the Hells, the Balance would dissolve into chaos. The murder of a million souls would alter it forever.

He could not allow that to happen.

Zayl began to make his way through the trees along the edge of the wide boulevard, toward the Silver City. He thought of something else: there was no way to know how long Shanar's magic would last as he moved farther away from her. Right now, he remained cloaked in illusion, but at any moment, he might be left fully exposed.

It was not a comforting thought.

He caught glimpses of the two guards through the branches as he went. They were passing under a gigantic carved arch made of glistening stone. Their conversation echoed back to him, and he sped up to catch as much as he could, his curiosity piqued.

"Providing an escort to the Ascension is an honor indeed," the first one was saying. "You will receive an audience with Balzael, and if you are lucky, even the archangel of Valor himself may appear. Not many of us soldiers have that chance."

"I have heard that Gealith is beautiful, although I have not seen her myself," the second said. "I was tasked to stand guard at the Ring during her birth—alone, I might add. Punishment for failing my second test."

"Beautiful, yes," said the first. "But something is not quite right with her. You will see what I mean when we reach the library . . ."

Their voices faded as they disappeared into the columned hall. Zayl stopped where the cover of trees ran out. He would have to cross about thirty feet of open space to reach the arch and the hall beyond it, which was empty now.

"You're not doing what I think you're doing," Humbart muttered. "You'll be discovered, lad! Think of the mission."

But Zayl was already breaking cover, marching purposefully under the arch and into the cool interior space.

He ducked behind a column and looked around him. The wonders he had seen earlier paled in comparison with this: soaring buttresses ran in a seemingly endless line down the right side of the hall, overlooking the gardens, supported by massive columns with intricately carved figures that appeared to move, their outlines drawn with light that glittered like crystal.

Zayl began making his way through the columns, keeping to the edge of the gigantic hall, avoiding the light as much as possible. The air was filled with music so beautiful it made his heart ache for things he had left behind. *Salene*, he thought, and her face sprang fully formed into his mind, her beautiful, expressive eyes searching his, as if asking him why he had abandoned her. As a Rathmian, he believed that his life would take a path best suited for him and that it would end when it was time and not before. And yet now he began to question fate, wondering if he had somehow wandered off the path he had meant to follow. He saw his mother and father standing on the

bow of the ship as it went up in flames, beckoning to him for help. Their deaths had been his fault—he had started the fire that killed them. Perhaps fate had abandoned him, after all; perhaps it had been at that very moment. What if everything had been an illusion? He had dedicated his life to Trag’Oul, the Guardian of Sanctuary, had believed with all his heart in Rathma’s transformation to serve the Balance. The great dragon endured as a constellation of stars that spoke of man’s past, present, and future, and all those futures existed only because of the Balance. Light and darkness, the Heavens and the Hells, Sanctuary on the tipping point between them, an equilibrium that must be maintained. Was it all a lie perpetrated by a man who had trained the first of the priests of Rathma in his own madness and hallucinations and then left them alone to a blank future driven by chance?

The thought shocked Zayl. All these many years, he had never truly doubted Trag’Oul’s existence or the mission handed down from Rathma to Mendeln, brother of Uldyssian and the first true convert to the priesthood of the necromancers. The Balance was paramount and must be maintained. It was why he was here, risking his own life. But now it seemed incredible to him that he had rarely questioned the teachings of his elders, never wondered if perhaps Trag’Oul was the fabrication of the deranged mind of a firstborn nephalem lost and broken and pursued by his mother and father to the ends of Sanctuary and beyond.

You know the teachings of Rathma to be true, a small and sober voice in Zayl’s head insisted. *Your powers are the proof of it; they have enabled you to peer into the other realm, to call back the dead, to sense the Balance itself in everything*. Even Humbart, a spirit he had raised and bound to a skull, was a testament to all he had learned and all that was possible. And yet in spite of this, everything felt like a sham after the curtain had been torn away, a great cosmic joke at his expense, his life a series of wandering pursuits driven by no larger purpose than the delusions of his own mind.

Zayl slowly realized the music had changed, gaining a deeper, more complex background. A heaviness pressed down on his shoulders. He came back to himself with a jerk. What had come over him? He had covered some distance without even knowing it. The two guards were in view again, but luckily, they had not glanced back yet.

They had stopped outside a massive door. Zayl crept as close as he dared and watched from behind the nearest column. He felt impossibly small, insignificant, a speck of dust on the world. Where was Trag’Oul now, at this time of greatest need? Where was his faith?

An angel opened the door to receive the Luminarei. This one was not dressed in armor and was female in general shape, her flowing robes catching the light of her being in gentle curves. Her voice joined

the musical notes in perfect harmony, and seeing her was like staring into the sun.

“What is your purpose?” the angel said.

“To accept our calling,” the first guard said. “And lead Gealith to the light.”

“She is waiting,” the angel said. “Fate is open to you.”

The Library of Fate. Zayl’s heart fluttered softly like a bird in his chest. Of course—the library’s influence had fallen over him as he had approached it, fate turning to loss, destiny to chance, as Tyrael had warned them might happen. *The High Heavens may affect humans in ways you cannot understand.*

The guards slipped past her, into the glowing room beyond. Zayl thought about trying to continue, but the angel remained in place. He would be seen, and it was too close for Shanar’s illusion to hold.

The necromancer glanced down at his hands. The white fire that had coated them was flickering.

Shanar’s magic was fading, and Zayl was out of time.

Chapter Thirty-Two



The Gardens of Hope

Jacob looked around in astonishment. They had broken through the cover of the line of trees and entered the most incredible landscape he had ever seen. It went on and on into the distance.

The Gardens of Hope.

Nothing—not even his wildest dreams—could compare to this.

The ground was dusted with flowers made of multicolored light petals. The gardens were not static; the flowers were constantly changing, thick beds of them glowing bright and fading while others grew up in bursts of color to replace them. Crystalline shapes like glittering shrubs sprouted from the flower beds and sent cascades of twisting, curling strands back down upon themselves, living fountains of light and sound. Reflective pools surrounded the fountains, holding the shimmering curtains of light and crystal dust, sparkling like jeweled catch basins.

It was breathtaking. His spirits were lifted as if he had taken flight, the music bringing energy into his tired body until he felt weightless and free. All the dark dreams that had clung to him like spiderwebs, the tragedies of his past, the deaths of his father and mother, and the loss of his own purpose and confidence, slipped away as the gardens caressed his body and whispered a message of love and peace. He was no longer alone and never had to be again; wherever he went and whatever he did, he would carry this place with him. Paradise . . .

“There are great dangers here,” Tyrael said quietly. “Be careful you do not lose yourself forever in the beauty of what you see, what you feel. Be aware of how hope can be lost and turn into despair. Remember that you were never meant to experience this place.”

Jacob was brought back into himself with a jerk, but the feeling of contentment remained with him.

There were other beings in the Gardens of Hope.

Angels moved in the distance, gliding without sound, while others sat motionless on benches among the flowers or peering into the light pools as if they had been there for centuries. None of these angels wore armor; instead, they were clothed in robes the color of morning mist. They were beautiful, elegant creatures suggesting a perfection of form beyond anything Sanctuary could possibly understand.

But no one seemed to recognize or acknowledge the Horadrim. To them, this was a troop of angelic soldiers marching toward the Ascension. Shanar’s magic was holding.

“What are we going to do about the satchel?”

Jacob thought it was Gynvir who had spoken, but he could not be completely certain. The magic did its job, even for him; all he saw was a member of the Luminarei, wings undulating gently.

“Zayl will find his way to the Council chamber,” Tyrael said. “If he does not, we carry the stone back with our bare hands.”

The others were silent. They all knew that carrying the stone without protection meant an agonizing and terrible death. But Jacob found it hard to be bothered by this idea. The gentle music and peaceful surroundings continued to soothe his fears.

Paths of crushed crystal wound through the flower beds and around the treelike growths and pools. In the distance, rising up through the shimmering air, were the thick walls and soaring spires of the Courts of Justice.

He led the others along the path, weaving around hanging strands of living light. As he passed under a tall crystalline growth, a strand of light brushed his head. Warmth spread through his limbs, and he gasped out loud; images of himself as a boy cascaded through his mind, vivid and fresh, times before the rage plague had taken Staalbreak, with his mother and father living peacefully. His father, the constable, had been calm and steady then, the kind of man you could depend on, one who never acted impulsively, who always listened to both sides of an argument before ruling one way or another, and the walls of the town were strong and secure because of him.

Another strand brushed his shoulders. A shiver ran through him. Images of his father turned bloody and dark. Jacob was caught in a web of time and space, with no way out; his father had bred a son who could not escape his past, the rage plague that had destroyed his family only a symptom of something deeper, something more corrupt, a weakness of character that he could not avoid no matter how far he ran.

Jacob felt another soft caress across his cheek. It was like the cool, limp fingers of a corpse. He saw hanged men strung up from the ramparts of Staalbreak and heard his father’s laughter echoing through empty streets. He saw barbarian hordes with runes the color of fire, murder in their eyes as they rushed the town walls, wave after wave. He saw demons take their place as the walls came down.

There was no stopping them and no end to the madness and blood. His people were slaughtered, one by one.

Thin gray webs hung everywhere, draping the light trees in drifting sheets, cascading down like a smothering blanket upon the flower beds. Running along the webs were fat, hairy spiders, their eyes catching the light from the pools, fangs dripping. He glanced behind him, where a pool reflected the horrors in his mind, laying the truth

bare. Shanar's mutilated body was next to his own. There was no hope of redemption, no future beyond this place. He was lost within the suffocating webs.

Jacob screamed.



The shriek shattered the serene beauty of the gardens like an axe taken to a sheet of glass. The Horadrim came to a halt as the angels who had been wandering peacefully or sitting in quiet contemplation suddenly looked their way. Angels did not get physically ill, but they could experience injuries and stress and often retired to the gardens to heal and find a center of peace. These were not likely to be happy with the disturbance.

Tyrael cursed silently to himself. They were more than halfway through the gardens before Jacob had recoiled from the hanging strands as if reacting to a threat. He had known this might happen, particularly in here, where the promise of hope could so quickly turn sour for those who were not prepared to look inward.

Something else was wrong. Tyrael looked more closely. Thin gray tendrils had grown up through the branches of the tree where Jacob stood. They were so delicate as to be almost invisible, like hairline cracks across the beautiful bright lights of the gardens. But they had spread their corruption like a terrible disease.

The stone was here.

The extent of the corruption chilled his heart. The High Heavens were compromised, and he had no way of knowing how long it might take for them to return to normal once the Black Soulstone was removed.

But there was more immediate cause for worry. Shanar's illusion had begun to fade like a ghost image disappearing into the distance, and the mortal forms of the Horadrim were beginning to show through.

Several angels had begun to move through the garden paths toward them. These were not soldiers, but they could raise an alarm. If Tyrael didn't make it to the Council chamber before the Luminarei came for them, there was no hope at all.

"You."

A female angel had stopped a short distance away, her aura pulsing gently, her wings undulating in waves. "You were accused of being a traitor. Imperius has instructed anyone who sees you to report it to the guard."

“Whatever you have heard, you are mistaken. I have been on a secret mission to Sanctuary, the details of which do not concern you.”

“I—” Distracted, she looked at the others and seemed to recoil. “Their song . . . these are not Luminarei!”

Jacob stumbled back, his legs hitting the edge of a basin, and teetered there for a moment, trying to maintain his balance before toppling backward into the light pool.

The reflection in the pool was broken into multiple planes of color as he sank through the surface. It was not deep, but as the light covered him, he thrashed violently and screamed again, swinging at nothing Tyrael could see. Shanar rushed forward, clutching his arm and trying to pull him back, as more angels began to converge on their location. Jacob fought against her, but she got him upright again, holding on to the armor that encased his body.

An exclamation of shock and dismay came from one of the other angels, and the sound quickly spread through their ranks as they drew closer to the Horadrim.

Jacob’s wings had vanished.

The magic was breaking down faster now. Any semblance of order was swiftly dissolving into chaos, and they would have the real Luminarei at their throats at any moment.

Tyrael made a split-second decision.

“Run!” he said.

Chapter Thirty-Three



The Battle Begins

Zayl ducked farther behind the column. He had become skilled at hiding himself over the years. But it was a short-term solution to a much larger problem. It would not be long before Shanar's magic faded completely.

A moment later, the huge door swung open again, and the two guards came out, nodding to the angel in the hall before stepping aside to stand motionless and at rigid attention.

The new angel emerged from the library.

Zayl had to admit that Gealith was breathtaking. Her aura was as bright and crisp as the morning sunshine on a clear spring day, her light golden garments magnificent with their intricate folds and gentle curves that lay upon her weightless shape. Her wings were wide and tapered and trailed behind her in the air, moving in rippling waves as if she might take flight at any moment.

But as she walked out into the hall, he caught a glimpse of something strange, a darker tint to her wingtips like a shadow clinging to their edges.

"Fate is your last adviser," the angel at the door said. "I give you to the Defenders of the Arch. They shall guide you as you ascend to the ranks of Valor and pledge to serve this Aspect for the rest of your days, until you are struck down. Are you prepared?"

"I am," Gealith said.

"Very well." The angel stepped aside. "May you embrace your fate and find peace."

The angel disappeared back through the door. The Luminarei guards marched forward with Gealith in between them. Zayl slipped from one column to the next, following as closely as he dared. His good fortune held for now. There were no shouts of alarm, no immediate reaction, as they marched steadily away from the library and down the echoing hall.

They were heading straight toward the Halls of Valor and an army of Luminarei.



The guards and Gealith remained silent as they approached an intersection with another massive, empty corridor and turned right.

Far ahead, it ended in a courtyard open to the sky. Through the archways, the vast beauty of the gardens stretched out like shimmering jewels strewn across a meadow.

Zayl paused in shock. The Horadrim, their false wings gone, were running hard, pursued by angels in flight.

The guards had seen them, too. One let out an exclamation of surprise, breaking stride and crossing the corridor toward the open arches—and directly at the spot where Zayl hid.

He slipped his bone dagger from its sheath. The dagger was serpentine in shape, enchanted by the magic gifted to the necromancers by Trag'Oul, the great dragon. Necromancers relied on the spiritual energy of the dead. Zayl had used the dagger many times and in many different ways in his life, but he had not yet tried to call upon this power here, in the Heavens, and had no idea what it would do.

It was time to find out.

"You there," the guard said. He had stopped short, staring at the shadows where Zayl crouched, and had drawn his Luminarei sword, a wicked, glowing blade that cast light rays so bright it made Zayl wince. "You are one of *them*."

Zayl was fully exposed. There was no hope of hiding anymore. The necromancer muttered a spell under his breath, as quickly as he dared. He did not have the time to prepare in the way he normally would, casting runes upon the stone floor, but summoning spirits would not be likely to work, and he had other ideas.

Trag'Oul, he thought. Great dragon, hear me . . .

The guard attacked with a slashing blow, and Zayl raised his bone dagger. The dagger clashed against the holy blade, and a fierce burst of power and light threw itself outward between them. Zayl felt his legs begin to buckle, and he steadied himself against the searing pain that would surely come as the sword bit into his flesh.

But the blade did not continue its deadly arc; the tiny bone dagger had stopped it. The guard seemed perplexed, and he swung his weapon again, and again Zayl parried, taking a step backward toward the gardens. The Luminarei kept coming, and Zayl found himself tiring quickly, his muscles quivering with the strain of repelling each strong-armed thrust and slash. He heard the second guard shout from the corridor and resisted the urge to glance over his shoulder. Any distraction would mean certain death.

Until now, Zayl had remained on the defensive, blocking what the guard threw at him but nothing more. Any moment now, the second Luminarei would be upon him, and any faint hope he had of survival would be gone. If he was going to escape, he had to act quickly.

But Trag'Oul was silent, and the spirits of the dead did not exist

here. There was no help coming. He had to do this on his own.

A face swam into his vision, fully formed and whole. Salene. In an instant, she had been gone. Zayl saw the dark-winged creatures carrying her away in the night, watched her body yanked into the black skies; he saw her ephemeral form flickering before him, brought back from the dead in a rare fit of grief. Yes, he had loved her, in spite of the training that had been intended to strike such feelings from his soul, and perhaps that had made him human.

The guard saw an opening and struck. Zayl brought up the dagger at the last possible moment and willed himself *through* the twisting bone, summoning energies that had coiled within his chest like a snake. At the same time, he remembered what Tyrael had told them about the nephalem and the blood of angel and demon that mingled and flowed within their veins. He was his own greatest weapon, and he intended to use that to his advantage now.

The sword struck the bone dagger with a deafening clap and an explosion of energy. Instead of forcing the energy away from him, Zayl spoke several words of power out loud. Immediately, the blade began absorbing everything the Luminarei could give, feeding on his essence like a bloodsucking fiend, drawing more and more of the guard's light energy.

The dagger glowed fiercely as the guard collapsed onto the stone floor, nothing left of him but the armor he had worn. As the second guard reached him, Zayl released a focused bolt of energy that hit him in the chest. The guard flew across the corridor, crashing into the wall on the far side, where he lay motionless.

Zayl's body tingled, and he still felt the remaining essence coursing through him. The new angel, Gealith, stood a few feet away, but she did not move.

"Are you going to try to kill me, too?" Gealith said. Her tone was curious, her posture making her appear perplexed, nothing more. "I am unarmed. But you will find it impossible to get much farther than this."

"We are not here to kill," Zayl said. "We are here to save you all."

"Then you are badly mistaken," she said. Her form beneath the robes bulged and swelled. Darkness began to swirl more heavily, and her wings crackled with an energy that was not pure at all, but tainted with evil. It was as if she were shedding a skin of light and revealing a black core beneath.

Zayl felt the Balance tremble. This was an abomination, something that should not exist. Without a conscious thought, he threw every last ounce of the energy he had gathered through his blade as he thrust forward into the center of Gealith's being.

The angel shrieked, a terrible sound full of rage. The blackness

poured forth around Zayl's blade, but he held it with a two-handed grip, gritting his teeth as he felt the darkness touch him with icy-cold fingers. The moment seemed to go on and on, until finally the darkness was gone, and he was alone.

Chapter Thirty-Four



A Deadly Encounter

Tyrael raced down the garden path after Thomas and Cullen. The others had almost reached the massive pillars that marked the Courts of Justice, but Cullen had quickly fallen behind, huffing and puffing as he went, and Thomas had slowed down to wait for him. There was a gap of perhaps fifty feet between them and the rest.

Tyrael's breath burned in his lungs, his heart hammered in his chest, and he felt the world begin to swirl before his eyes. Normally, he would have had little trouble outrunning them all, but the wound across his torso and the large amount of blood he had lost were making him dangerously weak.

He glanced back once and saw that the nearest angel in flight was almost upon him. The angel was armed with a wicked-looking curved blade, the tip glowing white. Tyrael drew his sword once again, ready to engage the angel to give the Horadrim more time. But in his heart, he knew the effort was useless. Others were converging upon their position, far too many of them to fight.

So this was where it ended. A quest that had begun the moment he had ripped off his wings and chosen to plummet to Sanctuary as a mortal, aligning himself fully with the human race, an act intended to bring the Heavens and mankind together, to show each side the other's strengths and weaknesses, to forge a lasting and eternal peace and an unbreakable union against the forces of darkness. Angels and men, ruling over all. It seemed to be a ridiculous vision now. The chalice had forsaken him; he had asked for wisdom and had received nothing but despair.

Or perhaps not, Tyrael thought. Chalad'ar had shown him death. Perhaps this end had been inevitable all along. If so, he would go toward it honorably and be cut down fighting.

But when he turned back, Cullen was standing firm in the garden path, an object clutched in both hands. The nephalem key. Thomas stood behind him, his sword ready. The look on Cullen's face was of grim determination. He closed his eyes.

Power leaped from the key, a crackling band like lightning crisscrossing the space between the Horadrim. The band of energy met the angels coming from the right and swept them aside like a dinghy cast adrift in storm waves. Cullen released a second bolt from the key, this one directed over Tyrael's shoulder. The angel who had been pursuing him was lifted and tossed into a bed of flowers twenty feet away.

I have underestimated him, Tyrael thought. The idea gave him strength. But there were more angels coming. The other Horadrim had reached the Courts of Justice now and disappeared inside, but it was of little comfort to him; surely they would be met by more guards.

A group of Luminarei in full armor emerged from the open archways that lined the far side of the gardens, racing toward them. Immediately after them came the Sicarai. The destroyer flew across the space between them like a vengeful god, his weapon shining in the bright light. Cullen turned toward him and tried to release a fresh bolt of energy, but his conviction appeared to falter, and the bolt was easily deflected by the huge warrior.

As the Sicarai reached them, Thomas stepped in front of Cullen. Tyrael tried to come to his aid, but it was too late; the destroyer fell upon the man, striking a blow that shattered Thomas's sword into pieces and drove him to his knees.

Thomas raised one arm as if to try to ward off the Sicarai's attack, and his forearm was neatly severed just above the wrist by the destroyer's next strike. Blood fountained upward from the stump, splattering across the flower beds. He cried out once, his teeth grinding together, a look of surprise on his face.

The Sicarai was already swinging again, and this blow nearly cut Thomas in two.

Thomas slumped forward, already dead before he hit the crushed surface of the path, his blood staining the crystals red.

Cullen dropped to his knees beside his friend's body as the Sicarai readied himself to swing again, and then something massive struck Tyrael from behind, and darkness mercifully descended upon him, and he sensed nothing more.

Chapter Thirty-Five



The Courts of Justice

Mikulov paused for a moment inside the shadows of the columns that rose far above his head. It was cooler in here but no less magnificent than the Gardens of Hope; each new space was more remarkable than the next. This made the monastery in Ivgorod look like a child's toy in the hands of giants, and he knew that the sheer size and majesty of the entryway was meant to intimidate, to lend respect and gravity to what went on inside the Courts of Justice themselves.

The gods do not speak here. He had stepped through the portal and into another world entirely, one that was governed by different rules and strange masters he did not recognize.

And Mikulov was alone.

As Jacob, Shanar, and Gynvir had raced toward the end of the gardens, he had paused a moment and started to circle back, meaning to give aid to Thomas, Cullen, and Tyrael, who had fallen behind. But a group of half a dozen angels had come onto the path between them, all brandishing weapons, and when the monk had turned again, he found several more on the path in front of him. So he had cut across the beds and between two large light trees, heading for an open archway some distance to the left of where the others had disappeared inside.

Mikulov had peered out into the gardens, and what he saw there chilled his blood. Thomas, Cullen, and Tyrael had been caught by a group of Luminarei guards led by the Sicarai. The huge warrior came at the Horadrim like a hurricane, pushing aside Cullen's attempt to stop him and shattering Thomas's sword as he tried to protect his brother. And then . . .

The monk had trained for many years to steel himself against both physical and emotional pain. The gods were there to support him when he fell, lift him up when he was weak. The Patriarchs preached serenity in the face of evil, to do what must be done without allowing oneself any sign of frailty. Even his own skin had been hardened through years of training, made nearly impenetrable to weapons or claws.

But what he saw cut through him as if he had been wounded. Mikulov bit on his cheek to keep from crying out as the sword whistled down, opening his friend's belly, and Thomas's blood wet the ground in a crimson gush.

All at once, his vision from the road to Bramwell came back to him: trapped inside the gates of the Heavens, Tyrael's transformation into a

hooded, faceless stranger, Thomas decapitated in front of them by Tyrael's own sword . . .

More Luminarei soldiers had streamed out into the gardens. Tyrael and Cullen were lost under a swarm of them; the monk saw Cullen go to his knees under a sea of flashing swords and armor, and the archangel was knocked down from behind.

They are lost. Every ounce of Mikulov's being screamed at him to rush back in, to avenge their deaths in whatever way he could. And yet he knew it was useless, that he could never hope to defeat so many alone.

The monk slipped to the floor, his inner balance shaken. The columns before him seemed to bend and bulge, shadows lengthening. Shapes crept forward through the gloom, their dress eerily familiar. *Ivgorod assassins, sent by the Patriarchs to kill me.* Against their orders, he had left Floating Sky forever, and therefore he had been marked for death. They had pursued him to the edge of Sanctuary and beyond.

The forms dissolved into Luminarei guards taking up positions along the walls of the giant room that opened onto the Courts of Justice. Mikulov shook his head as if to clear the fog that had come over him. The Ivgorod assassins were not here in the Heavens, of course. But the threat was real.

Mikulov remembered the battle at Gea Kul so many years ago, when the demon horde was closing in on them, with little hope for escape. He had called upon an inner power that he did not know he possessed, an energy gathering at his core that exploded outward like a tiny sun, laying waste to his enemies and cracking the very ground beneath his feet.

It had been the beginning of his awakening to his birthright, he realized: his transformation into a nephalem warrior, able to tap into the true source of his power.

Bring me strength to do what must be done. The deaths of his friends would mean nothing if the Black Soulstone remained in place. He had to hope that Jacob, Shanar, and Gynvir were on their way to the Council room. He must act to draw attention away from them, and the mission must continue, whatever the cost.

Mikulov closed his eyes. Something was building inside, a fire that would turn everything to ash. He saw waves crashing against rock, torrential rains tearing at the sides of mountains. He saw hurricanes uprooting trees like twigs and cyclones spinning and ripping everything in their path. The gods were in all things, their power all-consuming, and within him he wielded that power like a struggling demon about to be set free. He held on as it began to burn, clenched his teeth, let it grow stronger and deeper.

A Luminarei guard spotted him and shouted to the others. As they

took flight, Mikulov stepped from the shadows, took a deep breath, and slammed his hands together in a mighty clap, finally letting go of the beast within.



Jacob led the two women toward the vast recesses of the Courts of Justice as quickly and quietly as he could.

He tried to steady his feet as they slipped among the wide columns into a cooler, covered space. He had no doubt the angels would be here any moment; he could only hope they would have assumed the Horadrim had kept going down the wide corridor instead of following them inside the courts. From what Tyrael had told him about this place, it was likely to be empty, since a new archangel of Justice had not been named and the angels were at the Ascension, and he knew from their map that directly on the other side, they would find a corridor leading to the Angiris Council room.

Above a massive set of doors hung a glittering replica of El'druin, ten times the size and cast in some kind of strange metallic ore. The symbol of Justice itself, meant to humble all who entered.

But that was nothing to what they found beyond it.

The next room was empty, or it appeared to be. It was set up like an amphitheater, with seating running around three sides and facing an open ring in the center. Giant lecterns of stone and crystal faced the ring and the seats on the other side, and one wall was inscribed floor to ceiling with words writ large and with an elegant hand. From what Tyrael had said, Jacob knew this must be the Wall of Edicts—the laws of the Heavens themselves, carved in stone and followed for millennia.

But it was the statues that dominated the ring, robed male and female angels that towered over the seats below, their arms outstretched and pointing to where the accused would stand and where a spiraling column of stone rose to the ceiling. Figures crawled from the column, demons and tortured angels crying out in agony, the condemned and sentenced, their sins permanently frozen upon their intricately carved features as they reached toward the giant statues, begging for mercy.

“The darkness within,” Gynvir whispered. The barbarian was staring at the carvings, her face drained of color, mouth agape. Shanar stood next to her in a similar pose, tears wetting her cheeks, for once unable to speak a word. Jacob knew what Gynvir meant; the sense of terrible deeds and unforgivable sins permeated this place, as if the

ghosts of those who had passed through the Ring of Judgment had taken up residence and haunted its walls. The heavy silence pushed down on them. He imagined the trials that had taken place here over the centuries, those angels who had faced their sins with dignity and those who had gone screaming to the prison cells he knew were somewhere below their feet.

There would be no mercy shown for the guilty. If the Horadrim were captured, if they even lived long enough to make it to this place, they would be condemned to their own private torment.

Jacob shivered. Everything that he had ever done wrong seemed to crash down on him all at once, culminating with what had happened in the Gardens of Hope. He touched the hidden sheath that held the weapon Commander Nahr had forged for him—the Sicarai's sword. He thought he had lost it in the earlier struggle when the light-tree tendrils had touched him. Now he drew it out, staring at the glowing double blade, the weight of it in his hands steadying his nerves.

His breakdown in the gardens kept coming back to him. He had wanted to embrace everything that Tyrael had expected of him, but at the first sign of adversity, he had collapsed like a child, screaming for help against the ghosts of his own past. And now the Horadrim were scattered, some of them likely dead, and the mission was in tatters.

Forgive me, Jacob prayed silently. It was wildly ironic that he was standing here now, in the heart of Justice itself, exposed yet again as a fraud. He had let his father, his friends, his entire world down, and he was leading the woman he loved to her certain doom.

The thought stunned him with its simplicity. *Yes, I love her*. Of course he did; he always had. The truth of it had been lost within a sea of complications and denials, but Shanar's kiss in the Pools of Wisdom still burned on his lips, and the taste of her still haunted him. The fact that they were all likely about to die only served to heighten the intensity of his feelings.

He glanced at her, saw the loveliness in her face, the vulnerability she tried to hide with jokes and a carefully constructed casualness that covered up her true self. Her incredible skill had gotten them this far. It fed a growing fire within him, a determination to make this final stand an honorable one.

As he took Shanar's hand, a muffled thud came from somewhere outside, and the floor shook under their feet. Jacob stumbled and caught himself, supporting Shanar before she fell. A rumble ran through them like thunder.

He did not know why he thought of the monk, only that he sensed in some way that Mikulov was responsible for the explosion. Mikulov had drawn the attention of the Luminarei. They had to use the distraction that the monk had provided and hope the corridor that led

to the Council room was clear.

A noise came from beyond the courtroom. Someone was coming. They had to hide somewhere, and fast. Jacob led Shanar and Gynvir down through the ring of seats to the floor, where the huge column of stone towered over them, even larger than it had appeared before. The carved angels and demons were three times the size of him. Quickly, he tucked himself between two of them at the base of the column, and Shanar and Gynvir did the same. The condemned reached out as if to hold them for all eternity, smothering them with their cold, frozen embrace.

A moment later, an entry beyond the lecterns slammed open, and four Luminarei guards came rushing through the courtroom, weapons out. They did not hesitate, continuing out the far end and disappearing through the doors. Jacob waited another moment to be sure there were no more coming, and then he emerged from the small space and escorted the two women up the steps. The guards had left the door behind the lecterns slightly ajar. Jacob crept up to it as quietly as possible, just close enough to peer through the crack.

Another corridor led away from the courts. It was empty. No Luminarei guards stood there ready to ambush them.

He brought Shanar and Gynvir out of the Courts of Justice, toward the Angiris Council room, where the Black Soulstone waited silently for them, its secrets buried deep within its ebony shell.

Chapter Thirty-Six



Imprisoned in the Fist

Pain lanced his skull, a sharp spike driven through his temples that quickly turned into a throbbing ache. He wandered through dream landscapes, one blending into another. The Sicarai was coming at him again and again, the edge of his sword gleaming in the light of a raging fire. The flames consumed the people who had been lashed down, unable to escape. The smell of cooking flesh grew stronger as the screams of the tortured and dying rose up from all around him. Leah reached out, begging for his help, but he could not move his arms, and behind her stood Deckard Cain, a look of sadness and regret etched upon his features. Cain's beard was full of blood.

Tyrael opened his eyes. Darkness pressed in on him for a moment, and he tried to sit up, but another flash of pain drove him back again. He blinked, trying to clear his sight and orient himself. The world came crashing in all at once. He was in a prison chamber, his arms and legs shackled to the stone wall behind him. He reached up until the chain stopped his arm short. He could just touch the back of his head, and his hand came away sticky with blood.

Nausea rolled over him. He closed his eyes and took a slow breath, then opened them again.

Cullen sat slumped against the wall opposite him, also chained, his bald, bloodstained head against his chest. He did not move, did not seem to breathe.

Tyrael gathered himself and attempted to sit again, this time more slowly. The thudding pain subsided slightly, and he was able to prop himself up until the chains stopped his movements. The bonds that held him were meant for angels and vibrated at a frequency that neutralized an angelic resonance. He felt them buzzing against his flesh.

He looked around at the walls, stained with fluids of demons. The smell of death was strong. Movement came from the shadows beyond. A monstrosity of flesh, rolling greasily in the dark, a glint of red fire flashing from baleful eyes that glared out as if from the pits of the Burning Hells themselves. Chains rattled as the thing pulled against its demonic bonds, bands of silver with a ring of pure light running through them. It stepped forward, moaning. Tiny, lipless mouths with needlelike teeth gaped like landed fish all over its body, and little arms draped themselves over the fat that oozed from every crevice.

Another moved in the opposite corner, hissing and grunting, a coiled, deceptively calm demon like a snake about to strike. Minions

of the Hells, captured by Imperius and the Luminarei. They were kept here to intimidate other prisoners and occasionally, if they got close enough, tear them to shreds.

There was no music here, no bright lights and glittering crystal. Tyrael and Cullen were in the belly of the Fist, the underground prison of the High Heavens created to keep the condemned for all eternity. Room after room of carved and dripping stone, cells built to hold creatures that could not be contained anywhere else. Demonic torture chambers with blades built to slice thick flesh, flay skin from bone. Other chambers specially shielded to keep angels pinned to the walls. Bottomless wells filled with brackish, ice-cold water, where demons were submerged to their necks and forced to swim until they could no longer move, when they were dragged out and forced to go through it all again. The rooms led from one passage to another in a maze that confused anyone unlucky enough to break free; the lower depths were said to still hold the mummified remains of those who had wandered there and perished in the dark.

"Cullen," Tyrael whispered. His throat felt as if it were on fire, his lips cracked and dry. He pulled gently against the chains that bound him, then harder. They held firm; these were no ordinary chains forged of simple iron. They were built to hold the strongest angels housed in the Fist and could not be broken by a mortal.

Cullen shifted slightly and moaned. Tyrael could not see any obvious wounds. Perhaps the blood was not his own. *Thomas*. The thought brought back everything that had happened in the gardens, the Sicarai brutally disemboweling the Horadrim as he knelt, defenseless and wounded. Blood seeping out onto the crystal dust.

Anger coursed through him, and he yanked the chains harder. Someone had locked him up here and taken El'druin. Panic ran through Tyrael as he realized Chalad'ar was also missing.

A low, grating sound brought him back from the edge. Light came around cracks in the door to the cell; a moment later, the door swung open, and the Sicarai entered the room.

"Release me," Tyrael said, his voice hoarse and far too weak to be commanding.

The Sicarai didn't answer. He only waited. It wasn't long before someone else joined them.



Balzael walked through the door and took up a position next to the Sicarai. He carried something, but Tyrael could not see what it was in

the shadows. "A clipped bird in a cage," Balzael said. "I promised you that not so long ago, did I not? I had hoped you would return here voluntarily. I must admit, I still had my doubts. I imagined you to be too much of a coward to do it. But you came even earlier than I had expected, and you brought friends."

"Release these bonds," Tyrael said quietly, "and see how much of a coward I am."

Balzael chuckled. "I think not. Although I would enjoy making you bleed, mortal. You disgust me. Do you know the Council discussed your archangel status at their last meeting? They do not know what to call you. Traitor, perhaps. You will stand trial, if you live that long. Your crimes are punishable by death. I may take it upon myself to carry out justice a bit early and save us all the time."

"Death comes to all of us sooner or later."

"All mortals, yes. I can smell your stench from here. You chose to stand with the filth of Sanctuary, and now you will suffer their fate."

"Imperius does not know what the stone is doing to him," Tyrael said. He was growing tired of the lieutenant's games. "To all of you! Can you not see the corruption, the darkness that has crept into your midst? Soon the High Heavens will fall, and the Burning Hells will rise to take their place."

"He cares not for your theories."

"Get him in here. Whatever he has to say, he can say it to my face."

"Imperius? Why would he want to see you? He is far too busy with the Ascension, and I would not bother him with such drivel." Balzael chuckled again. "You have no idea what is really going on. You are not very smart, are you, little bird? Perhaps your mortal status has affected your mind."

A chill ran through Tyrael at Balzael's words. "Imperius does not know I am here," he said. "If not my brother, who else is a part of this, other than the destroyer? Those creatures that have been chasing us?"

"That is none of your concern," Balzael said. "You have played an important role, finding the nephalem stronghold and opening the door, and now it is time for your friends to finish the job they came to do. You, however, will not be joining them."

He held what he had been carrying up to the light, then tossed it at Tyrael's feet. The Chalice of Wisdom clinked and rolled across the stone, coming to rest just inches away. In spite of himself, Tyrael felt the hunger for it rise up within his breast. He shuddered.

"We have kept a close watch on you," Balzael said. "Now you are a slave to the chalice and will do whatever it takes to bathe in the pools again. But do not worry. I do not think you will live much longer. Regrettably, I believe that you will be killed attempting to escape

along with your friend here.”

Tyrael was more immediately concerned with the other things Balzael had said. The chill deepened. As much as he did not want to hear it, they made some kind of sense. *You have played an important role . . . now it is time for your friends to finish the job they came to do.* All that time spent searching for the catacombs and knowing the phantoms were lurking somewhere close by, *feeling them . . .* that night in New Tristram, when they had killed the bar patron and marked Jacob. They could have swarmed the Horadrim then, but they did not. And the battle on the mountain, when they had flitted among the trees and above the cliff face, never attacking. Why?

Tyrael managed a grim smile. “What do you mean, finish the job?”

“Imperius and the rest of the Council will be informed that you and your friend, along with the other man the Sicarai killed, are the only ones who came here to steal the stone. I will make sure to explain your foiled plan to them. You are the perfect distraction.”

Understanding dawned. “You want the stone for yourself,” Tyrael said. “And you are going to use us to steal it.”

Perhaps at first, Balzael had hoped the stone’s influence on the Council would compel them to destroy Sanctuary. But the Council would not act quickly enough. So Balzael had to improvise.

“The archangels will put you to death when they find out what you have done!”

“Perhaps,” Balzael said. “If they can find me. Of course, by then, if all goes well, I will be beyond their reach. But if I die, so be it. That would be a small price to pay for the end of the human race. Our scouts you call phantoms have been well trained. They will do the dirty work.”

Tyrael’s mind was reeling. Could he really have been manipulated in this way? Had he been so blind? Chalad’ar was supposed to help him see the truth, not hide it away.

He looked at the chalice lying at his feet. In spite of all that had happened, his thirst for it was nearly overpowering. He still longed to disappear within its depths, to lose himself among the threads and find peace in oblivion.

“You do not know where the rest of the Horadrim are,” he said. “You do not know how many we have or whether they are still alive.”

“But I know where they are going,” Balzael said. “You have sent them after the stone. I have ordered all guards away from the chamber, and the rest of the Luminarei are attending the Ascension. All we have to do is wait for them to bring the stone back to Sanctuary, and then we will take it. Do you really think any of them can get away from us, once we choose to come after them?”

“You cannot enter the catacombs,” Tyrael said. “They are shielded

from you—”

“Enough of this,” Balzael said. “Do not concern yourself with such trifles when there are so many more important things to accomplish.” He strolled over to where Cullen lay against the wall. “You still do not understand,” he said softly. “The stone holds great power. It may be forged from darkness, but its true purpose is too special to waste.”

A faint rumble made the walls and ceiling tremble slightly. Balzael looked at the Sicarai. “What was that?”

“I do not know, my lord,” the destroyer said. “I will find out—”

“No,” Balzael said. “It does not matter. Imperius has been sequestered in his chambers, but it is time to fill him in. On our terms, of course. You know what to do. Go.”

The destroyer nodded once and disappeared. Balzael reached down and took Cullen by the throat, half lifting him off the floor. He turned back to Tyrael. “This one shall be an example. So that you will truly feel the power we wield over you.”

Tyrael struggled against the chains as the monstrosities in the corners of the room moaned eagerly, red eyes glowing, mouths snapping open and shut. “Do not kill him,” he said. “He is an innocent.”

“Oh, he is far from that,” Balzael said from the shadows. “But I will not kill him. You will.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven



The Luminarei

The necromancer slipped through shadows and light. Rays streamed through the arched openings from the gardens and fell across the corridor, but they could not cut completely through the darkness.

Or perhaps that existed only in his mind.

He had watched Thomas get cut down and had seen Tyrael and Cullen taken by the Sicarai, dragged away toward the Courts of Justice. He had felt the dull *whump* of the explosion and could only assume it had been Mikulov; whether he had survived it was a mystery. And he had not seen Jacob, Shanar, or Gynvir.

For all Zayl knew, they were dead, and he and Humbart were alone.

Alone against an army.

The necromancer had circled the Halls of Valor, slipping through the guards stationed at the entrance and working his way past the main auditorium. The sight chilled his blood: a vast hall full of Luminarei, all of them restless and murmuring together, waiting for the new angel to arrive. It was only a matter of time until what he had done was discovered. By then, he hoped to be far away from them and inside the Angiris Council room.

When the explosion had occurred, the guards seemed to be thrown into disarray, and some of them had gone streaming out the doors toward the gardens, while others had remained in place, searching for their leaders. But Zayl had kept hidden and crept away, and soon enough, he was once again alone. The corridors and halls seemed to go on forever. It was darker here, enough so that flames were held in troughs that ran along the ceiling far above him. There were heads mounted on the walls, demons of all shapes and sizes, and weaponry, huge swords and spears and chains with spikes and metal rods. He passed through an atrium with some kind of tapestry made of light strands, the moving pictures depicting the great battles fought over the millennia between the Heavens and the Hells. Zayl saw demons disemboweled, the skies darkening with a scourge of angels in flight, the ground torn open and giving birth to monstrosities. He saw the Prime Evils launching at the archangels in a clash within the bowels of the Hells themselves. And he saw the dragon, lit up like a constellation in the night sky.

As he passed through each chamber, he felt larger than before, nearly invincible, and the darkness that had fallen over him began to fade. Perhaps he was the only Horadrim left, but did it matter? He

could still get to the Council room and steal the stone out from under the Luminarei, accomplish the mission he had vowed to complete. And if they discovered him, he would fight to the death and take as many of them with him as possible. He had already killed the guards and Gealith, so why not more?

Perhaps he should forget the stone, Zayl thought. Perhaps the fight itself was more important. The destroyer who had come after them was Luminarei, after all, and it was quite possible Imperius himself had sent him to hunt them down. And the destroyer had seemed to work in tandem with the phantoms.

The phantoms that had killed Salene.

It was clear that the archangels were responsible for everything that had happened to him. They deserved to die for their sins.

“Put it away,” Humbart muttered. “Do you want them to see us?”

Zayl realized he had drawn his dagger. “Be quiet, Humbart,” he said. “I know what I’m doing.”

“You think you can cut them all down? This place plays tricks with the mind, lad! Don’t do anything stupid. Remember the Balance. That is what you’ve come for, to restore it, not for revenge, Zayl! That’s not who you are.”

Unfamiliar feelings raced through the necromancer, battling for control. Humbart was right; he had forgotten his training and let the overwhelming presence of the Heavens affect him. And yet he could not seem to let go of the rage he felt, an all-consuming fire that burned out of control—

A noise came from somewhere just ahead where the hall opened into a larger space. Zayl flattened himself against the wall below a series of snarling, glassy-eyed fallen heads, creeping ahead more slowly toward the angle in the hall where the noise had come from, aware that he was exposed. The thought of hand-to-hand combat made his heart race and his blood sing. He sensed that an archangel was just around the corner, perhaps Imperius himself. *I will see if archangels bleed.*

“Careful, lad,” Humbart said. “Careful . . .”

But Zayl was beyond hearing. He leaped forward, his dagger ready and glowing with a fierce light—

And ran straight into Jacob of Staalbreak.



Mikulov swam back through deep waters, the screams of the dying monks of Floating Sky echoing in his mind. He had been watching

them from above like a sun god, and as the assassins crept closer to his location, monkeys clambering up towering ladders of light and sound, he unleashed a wave of devastating power that tore away the monastery walls like matchsticks and blew bodies apart, limb from limb.

The Patriarchs were gathered inside the worship room, sitting cross-legged in a circle and chanting prayers to the gods. The wave of power caught and lifted them up into the wind, pulling the flesh from their bones, distributing them into the elements as they became one with all things.

As Mikulov watched the place where he had grown up vanish into the ether, he felt himself torn apart, the layers that had formed him yanked away, one by one, until he was left with nothing but a beating heart, and then even that was silenced as the angels descended on his world, swords of pure light slashing and burning the ground to a bare, smoking husk.

Mikulov's head pounded. He sat up. Scorch marks ran across the carved columns around him, and a thin crack had opened in the polished stone floor. Pieces of armor, the only remains of Luminarei guards, lay scattered across the corridor. For a moment, awe over what he had done swept through him as he eyed the devastation, and then sorrow overwhelmed him. *I have done damage to the Heavens themselves.*

It seemed impossible. He had killed angels. What did it mean?

They would have murdered him and the rest of his friends if he had not acted first. But the knowledge did not soothe him. An Ivgorod monk was not supposed to feel pride, shame, or fear; there was no sense of accomplishment, no selfishness in pursuit of the greater good and the service of the thousand and one gods.

But he had changed, and perhaps his identity had changed, too. He was no longer only a monk from Ivgorod. Deckard Cain himself would have warned him always to act in service to those who were not able to help themselves. Sanctuary's fate lay in his hands.

Mikulov heard the thunder of approaching wings. He stood amid the crater he had created, rising out of the crouch he had held with a single breath, and he raised his arms. Around the corner came a flood of angels, hundreds of them or more, deadening the Heavens' resonance, which still played gently from nowhere and everywhere at once.

"I'm here!" he screamed, words torn from his throat. "Come for me, if you dare!"

And then he turned and ran faster than he had ever run before, leading the angelic horde away from the Courts of Justice and the Angiris Council room.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



The Black Soulstone

Zayl had Jacob by the hair, dagger poised to strike. His eyes were violent and unfocused, and for a moment, Jacob actually thought he might slit his throat.

Gynvir leaped forward, unslung her axe, and swung at the necromancer, who parried her blow with the blade, a seemingly instinctual move. The energy of the clash released a shower of sparks and a burst of violet color. Gynvir came at him again. The next swing took the bone dagger from his hands, and it went clattering across the floor.

“Wait!” Humbart shouted as she raised the axe to remove Zayl’s head from his shoulders. “Don’t be foolish, woman! It was an accident, can’t you see? Zayl mistook you for the enemy!”

The barbarian growled deep in her throat, the sound turning into a strangled cry. She seemed to struggle with herself, muscles quivering, before she dropped the axe head to her side and turned away.

“I am sorry,” Zayl said. He raised his hands. “For a moment, I saw . . . the black-winged phantoms and Salene’s mutilated body. I let this place affect me and lost control.”

“That remains to be seen,” Jacob said. He rubbed his throat. “Where are the others?”

The expression on the necromancer’s face changed. “Tyrael and Cullen have been taken by the Sicarai into the Courts of Justice. Thomas . . . Thomas is dead.”

No. Jacob shook his head, unable to believe it. “How?”

“The Sicarai struck him down. Cullen fought bravely, but it was too late. Tyrael was ambushed from behind.”

“You lie,” Gynvir said. “It’s some sort of trick—”

“Damn you, woman,” Humbart said. “He’s telling the truth.”

The barbarian took a step toward Zayl and the skull, but Jacob stopped her. He tried to calm the quiver in his voice. “There’s little time left before they discover we’re here. Thomas would have wanted us to keep fighting.” He put out a hand to Zayl. “Give me the satchel.”

Zayl shook his head, his eyes going glassy again for a moment before regaining their focus. “No,” he said. “You cannot carry it.”

“I can, and I will,” Jacob said. He was surprised by the firmness in his own voice. This was how he would find peace and justice within himself, one way or another. “Now, give it to me, necromancer.”

Zayl removed the satchel from where it was belted around his waist, fumbling clumsily until Jacob helped him with the buckle.

“Jacob,” Shanar said, “the satchel’s magic has been damaged. It’ll kill you.”

He ignored her and took the enchanted satchel in his own hands as Zayl retrieved his dagger from the floor. It was almost as if Jacob could feel it beat like a heart. He drew his sword, felt the energy thrumming within the blade, and turned toward the entrance to the Council chamber. “Let’s go,” he said, and stepped inside.



They all stopped abruptly, overcome by the beauty of it. Light streamed down from the tall, narrow windows that lined the chamber and the domed ceiling that soared far above them. The circular walls were carved with incredibly detailed patterns that evoked the movement of water or energy. The floor appeared to be made of glass or crystal. It was inscribed with golden lines in a pattern that led to the center, where five circles lay around a star, and a stone altar rose up to support the object they had come to see.

Carvings of wings stood below the thrones of the archangels. Jacob had expected to see a guard stationed inside, but the room was empty. He sheathed his weapon. In spite of the beauty, there was darkness here. The Black Soulstone stood upon its perch, swollen and glowing gently with a deep, blood-red light.

It knows we are here, Jacob thought. *I don’t know how, but it does.*

The stone was nearly the size of a man’s torso, much larger than they had been led to believe. He approached it cautiously, circling the altar it sat upon. He thought he saw it pulse in the rays of light from above. It was a hideous thing, an abomination of the natural world, built and fed by hatred, misery, and pain. And a man had created it. A member of the Horadrim, no less. The thought filled Jacob with dread. And yet there was something hypnotic about the stone, something that drew him inexorably forward.

That is its secret, he thought. *Hatred is seductive and easy to embrace.*

“Don’t touch it,” Shanar said.

“Don’t worry,” he said, his flesh crawling at the thought. Then another thought. “How can we possibly carry that?”

“The satchel will expand to contain it,” Zayl said. “I believe the stone swells in response to the emotions of mortals, but I have accounted for it. That is, if the satchel has not been damaged too badly by the Sicarai.”

Jacob’s heart beat faster, seemingly in time with the pulse of the stone. He noticed gray lines tracing the golden design in the floor

beneath his feet, running toward the walls. They were coming from the stone. He thought of the gray streaks tainting the trees in the Gardens of Hope. It was like a web encasing the Heavens, holding the angels captive. The creeping sense of disgust ran through him again, and he had to stop himself from jittering in place as if he had stepped into a vat full of spiders. He wanted to get away from this room, the faster the better.

But first, they had to collect the stone.

Jacob opened the satchel, but it was far too small to fit anything much larger than Humbart. He began to speak, but his words trailed away as it flapped in his hands and expanded like a hungry mouth. He let the satchel go, and it flew through the air and fastened itself against the black, glossy surface like a snake unhinging its jaw to swallow its prey whole, surrounding the stone inch by inch, *consuming* it.

Jacob glanced at his friends in astonishment. Gynvir made the sign of her forebears, backing away, while Zayl remained in place, swaying slightly. Shanar muttered something under her breath.

He looked back at the satchel, fascinated and revolted in turn, as it finished its work. A sucking, slippery noise filled the room. The soulstone was being reduced in size as it was taken inside, the bloody glow dying away. Finally, it was done, and the satchel sat silently on top of the altar. The stone inside was small enough that he could carry it.

“It will not be heavy,” the necromancer said. His words came slowly, as if with great effort. “But I do not know what level of protection the spell will offer. You may touch the surface and find it overwhelms you. We will need to move fast and get to the portal before the effects are irreversible.”

Jacob picked up the satchel, tested it, and found it solid. Zayl was right; he could carry it without much effort. A slight burning sensation made his hand begin to tingle. “I think I can make it. But we have a stop to make first.”

“There’s no time for detours,” Shanar said.

“He wouldn’t leave any of us behind willingly,” Jacob said. Until just now, when he spoke the words aloud, he wasn’t sure if he believed that himself, but he knew it was true. *Tyrael would not leave us, no matter what he has told us about this mission. Justice is about more than duty.* “We won’t, either, not until I breathe my last.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine



The Ring of Judgment

Chalad'ar consumed him.

With the slavering beasts howling and rattling their chains in the depths of the Fist, their bloodlust breaking free, Balzael held his blade against Cullen's throat and forced Tyrael to look into the chalice.

He tumbled down a bottomless hole, falling through strands of emotion that caught and spun him back and forth, threads of sorrow, loss, and despair. He sensed what the mortals he had once loved felt at the moment of their deaths; he became them for that moment, losing himself within the shock, anger, pain, fear, and ultimately, acceptance of their own ends. They were gone, and there was nothing left and no one to mourn them.

Death is inevitable. All mortals would die, and then they would rot away, their bones turning to dust and returning to the elements that birthed them. But the legacy of what they left behind endured. In a war where worlds hung in the balance, every possible advantage must be explored, every strategic option utilized. If they died in service to the greater good, was that the right choice? How did you weigh the loss of one soul against the epic struggle of good against evil, light against darkness?

If one were to make that choice for them, was that also justified? Or was it murder? Could a mass execution be a just act if it ended a larger war that had raged for millennia?

A strange feeling crept over him, a reaction to the void beyond, and in spite of himself, he began to wonder if Imperius had been right all along. *Above all else, light must triumph over darkness.* Tyrael drifted through endless strands of light. Clarity came to him. There were really two questions for which he needed answers. The first was what to do with the Black Soulstone, and the second had to do with the fate of Sanctuary.

The stone remained in the Heavens, spreading hatred and pain. It must be removed. Sanctuary, for all its promise, was a blight on the world of angels, and perhaps the safest and best choice was to remove the threat entirely, to burn it out before it had a chance to spread enough to consume them.

Tyrael did not know how long he was under. Someone was slapping his face, lightly at first, then harder. He blinked, his surroundings swimming into focus; Balzael stood before him, backhanding him with his armored glove. When he saw Tyrael open his eyes, he stepped back. "Better," he said. "Not quite time to give up. You have work to

do yet.”

They were no longer in the Fist. Tyrael was shackled to the Column of Tears, where the statues of the guilty and the damned reached eternally for their salvation.

“A stunning turn of events, is it not?” Balzael said. He nodded at the Sicarai, who stood rigidly at attention at Balzael’s side. “As the archangel of Justice, you sat on your throne in this very room and cast your judgment down upon the heads of countless prisoners. Today we will hold a very short trial and act as judge, jury, and executioner. I want to show you just how easily we control you now.”

“You control nothing,” Tyrael said. But his voice was rough, too weak to command an answer.

Balzael moved aside to reveal Cullen standing behind him, arms lashed, mouth gagged. Cullen blinked, eyes wide and staring vacantly at nothing.

“We have sent word to Imperius that I have cornered those who have dared to invade our halls,” Balzael said. “He will arrive just in time to watch you cut down your friend, and he will see me end the threat, once and for all. Or so he will believe. Your actions will show the weakness of your mortal heart as you turn upon a defenseless human to save your own skin. Imperius may hold no love for humanity, but he is, above all else, about honor on the battlefield, and this, combined with your betrayal of the Council, will make him see that I had no choice but to execute you on the spot for your sins.”

“You are consumed with bloodlust,” Tyrael said. “The stone has gotten to you, too, Balzael. You are making mistakes.”

“Far from it.” Balzael forced Cullen to his knees. “This spectacle I am staging will draw attention away from the rest of your little team and allow them to escape with the stone. They already have it in their possession. By the time Imperius and the others realize there are more of you in the Heavens, it will be too late to stop them.”

“Perhaps, except I will not play your part.”

“And why not? I can sense you are beginning to come around to our point of view. Is that not right? Chalad’ar speaks the truth. Sanctuary was never meant to exist. Inarius was a fool. It is a boil on the face of the forces of light, a doorway for the Burning Hells and all darkness to enter our world, and it must be eliminated forever.”

In spite of himself, Tyrael could not deny the logic. Sanctuary had no divine right to its own survival. It was created as a hiding place for rogue angels and demons, and the birth of the human race had been an accident. The sacrifice of the nephalem Uldyssian had changed his mind so many years ago, had made him see the potential in mankind for selflessness and honor and justice. But what if he had been wrong all along, and their potential for darkness outweighed everything else?

What if his mortal dreams of the extinction of Sanctuary had not been nightmares at all but a sign of what must be done for the good of the Heavens? What if that was his calling as Wisdom, a truth he had been avoiding for too long?

Above all else, light must triumph over darkness.

“Join us again, Tyrael,” Balzael said. “It does not have to end this way. We can go together to Sanctuary with the stone. Imperius and the rest of the Council have become impotent over time. This will force them to make a decision. The stone is too dangerous to remain in Sanctuary. I believe the Heavens will choose to destroy the world of men and end the threat—and if they do not, *we* can. And *we* must. It is not too late for you to become a guardian of the light.”

“Is that what you call them, guardians? Those things you command?”

“*We* are the guardians, you fool! And soon enough, once we have the stone, we will reveal ourselves as the true saviors of the High Heavens.”

“And what will you do with the stone?”

“That is our secret,” Balzael said. “But it will be cathartic, I promise you.”

Tyrael looked down. His arms were suddenly free of their chains, and El’druin had appeared in his hand. He looked at Cullen. The man stood silent and still, tears dried on his face, only his eyes still questioning.

The darkness was growing. Tyrael could feel it spreading throughout the Heavens, and soon it would begin to act on Sanctuary, consuming all light. Humankind would eventually fall to that darkness, allowing the corruption to overtake them. They were half-demon, after all.

Chalad’ar had shown him the true path. The chalice called to him, oblivion beckoning . . .

“Where are the others, the Horadrim? They have abandoned you, of course, as their race will. They are only interested in their own survival. Selfishness will lead to greed and finally to bloodlust. It always does.” Balzael gestured toward Cullen. “Cut him down,” he said. “Show us you are committed to serving the light!”

Tyrael shook his head. He felt the emptiness in his own heart. His fingers tightened on the grip of his sword until they ached. Everything he had done, every choice he had made from the moment he shed his wings, had been wrong. Angels and men could never peacefully coexist, and the darkness would never be vanquished fully until drastic measures were taken to ensure victory.

As he raised El’druin, he heard Balzael urging him on, and the whispers of the voice in his head grew louder every moment. He could

not think, could not see or feel; the cacophony within his mind reached a fever pitch. His dreams came back to him, dreams of fire and blood, Sanctuary crumbling underneath him, the screams of men, women, and children filling his ears.

Forgive me.



Cullen watched his destiny unfold through the eyes of a dead man.

He had awakened from one nightmare into another. His last memory before losing consciousness had been of Thomas, his friend, reaching out as if begging him for help before the Sicarai's sword cut him in two. He saw Thomas split open, saw the man's eyes go wide and then glaze over as the life left him forever.

I could not help him, Cullen thought. He had tried and failed. And now his best friend was dead.

And then a sudden flare of pain and oblivion.

He did not know how long he was unconscious. He saw monsters that must have been from nightmares, grotesque creatures with dozens of hungry, puckered mouths, chained to the walls of some dark place. He saw Tyrael bound before him, blood on his face. He heard voices but could not understand what they were saying.

When he finally regained consciousness, the Sicarai was dragging him to his feet, Cullen's arms lashed behind him. His head throbbed terribly. He looked around, taking in the huge column of statues rising toward the ceiling, the rows of empty seats facing him. They were in the Ring of Judgment, and Balzael would decide his fate, but what Balzael did not understand was that it didn't matter. He was already dead; all that was left was the wet work.

He saw Balzael awaken Tyrael with vicious, backhanded slaps. He heard their discussion, but his mind refused to process the words. He watched Tyrael struggle with himself and draw his sword as his bonds fell away.

And then, finally, it hit him: Balzael wanted Tyrael to act as his executioner.

Surely he would not. And yet the archangel was stepping forward, putting his blade against Cullen's neck. *Wait*. This could not be; something was wrong; Tyrael would not betray him. And yet the blade, hot on his neck, bit down. He felt blood trickle down his skin. It awakened something in him once again, something he had thought

was dead but was only sleeping.

“Wait,” he tried to say out loud, but Tyrael’s eyes had gone blank and dark.

You are still bound, Cullen thought, *even though the chains have fallen away*.

And then the Heavens exploded around him.

A great blue thunderbolt struck the Sicarai in the back, knocking him to the ground. He howled in surprise and pain, leaping up and turning to the door, where Shanar was throwing more fire and Gynvir charged ahead with her axe. Next to her was Jacob, already running forward, his angelic weapon burning, and behind them came the necromancer.

Chaos descended upon the Courts of Justice.

Cullen’s heart beat faster as he watched Balzael draw his own weapon. He looked back as Tyrael raised El’druin. Cullen tried to move away but could not, and the others were still too far away to stop him as the blade whistled down.

But the sword did not cut his flesh. It sliced through the bonds that held his arms, freeing him. Tyrael removed the gag from his mouth.

The archangel’s eyes were clear. “I am sorry for this,” he said. “I have been a fool.” He charged forward into the fray, leaving Cullen kneeling there, stunned, unsure of what had just happened but shocked to find himself suddenly alive again—and hungry for revenge.



The appearance of the Horadrim had shaken Tyrael free.

He had not expected them to come back for him. He had been clear enough in their training. The mission came first, and removing the stone was paramount. Those left behind would be sacrifices to the cause. It was how they all must act in order to have any chance at success.

And yet they *had* come back, risking their own lives, risking the mission, in order to try to save their friends.

To save him.

The bonds of Chalad’ar fell away from him all at once. He had been wrong, horribly wrong. He had let the corruption and darkness into his own heart, but what it all meant must wait—now he needed to act, before it was too late.

Incredibly, the Horadrim were holding their own against their opponents. Jacob was circling Balzael, his Hallowed Destroyer blazing with light, Zayl on the other side with his dagger out. But Balzael

would not strike and kept his sword between them so they had no opening.

Farther away, Shanar's staff was glowing with blue fire, and Gynvir was dancing lightly on her feet around the Sicarai, waiting for an opening. The barbarian was fighting as she never had before, infused with a magical energy that gave her strength. Furious, the destroyer could not break through Gynvir's defenses; somehow she parried his blows with her axe with tremendous explosions of power or avoided them entirely, while Shanar kept hitting him with bolts of energy that knocked him off balance. The two women worked seamlessly together, confusing the Sicarai as he turned from one to the other.

He screamed in anger and pain as Gynvir's axe slid off his own blade and caught his shoulder. But the destroyer was too strong to be denied for long. Shanar tried to contain him with a burst of energy, but he broke free and lunged at Gynvir with a move too fast for her to counter. She took his blade across her arm; luckily, she had shifted enough to keep the blow from hitting squarely and doing major damage, but Tyrael could tell it had wounded her. Blood dripped from her fingers as she gripped the handle on her axe and set her feet grimly, parrying the next thrust with her last remaining strength.

Then the Sicarai was upon her. He knocked the axe from her hands. As Gynvir fell backward to the floor, he raised his weapon for the killing blow.

Jacob left the satchel and the soulstone behind and threw himself into the path of the Sicarai's sword as it descended.

He was close enough for his weapon to deflect it slightly, but the blade sliced deep, spinning him around, where he landed in a heap against the base of the Column of Tears. Blood began to pool beneath him.

With a cry of inhuman fury, Cullen leaped forward, drawing out the nephalem key. Pure energy exploded from him, running up through the key in a white-hot surge of electricity. The destroyer met it with his own blade, and the two clashed with a tremendous explosion, throwing Cullen backward and shattering the Sicarai's weapon.

The destroyer roared in rage and pain. He strode forward and lifted Cullen by the throat. The Horadrim dangled helplessly, legs kicking, as the Sicarai studied his face, as if wondering how the little man had hurt him.

Distracted, he did not see Jacob pick himself up from the floor. Blood pulsed wetly down Jacob's chest, and his eyes were unfocused. But he picked up the key where it lay nearby. Energy crackled through his hands and into the key, making the metal glow white-hot.

He moved in front of the Sicarai and plunged it straight through his chest.

The key sliced through the destroyer's armor. The Sicarai shrieked, the sound echoing through the room, before he staggered backward, dropping Cullen and clutching at the wound that now bled light from his breast, the key still embedded there. He swayed back and forth, and the light coming from him grew in intensity like a tiny sun. Somehow Jacob's strike had run straight through to his core.

The Sicarai stood for a moment longer, clawing at himself as the wound became larger, light pouring from him as his ethereal form began to fade. The light suddenly burst forth in a hot and bright flare, and the Horadrim turned away quickly, shielding themselves.

Only his armor remained to clatter upon the stone floor.

Jacob withdrew the key from the Sicarai's breastplate, studying it in wonder, as if unable to believe what he had just done. And then he collapsed, motionless, to the floor.

With a sob of anguish, Gynvir crouched next to Jacob's prone form, holding his wound with both her hands as if trying to keep the life inside him. Tyrael's pride in his team was quickly extinguished by the sight of one of their own deeply wounded, surely dying, with nothing any of them could do. He had expected losses, had known they would come, but he could not bear it now, not after what had happened in the gardens.

By all that is holy, you will pay for this.

Tyrael turned back toward Balzael, El'druin glowing with righteous fire, but the Luminarei lieutenant was gone. Balzael might let them escape the Heavens for his own purposes, but he would soon be after them and the stone again. As long as he was still alive, the threat to Sanctuary remained.

Tyrael looked at his team gathered around their fallen comrade. "Get back to the portal," he said. "I will meet you there, if I can."

And then he ran out of the Courts of Justice, in the direction in which his nemesis had disappeared.

Chapter Forty



A Sacrifice for a Friend

“Oh, no.” Shanar crouched next to Gynvir over Jacob’s crumpled form. Under her fingers, blood still pumped from the wound. The blade had sliced right through his armor. Shanar looked up at where Zayl stood, tears shimmering in her eyes. “Please help him,” she said. “I saw what you did for Tyrael back in the catacombs. *Please!*”

Zayl knelt next to the two women, removing Gynvir’s hands so he could examine the wound. The barbarian stood and turned away with a cry of anguish, looking at the red liquid coating her skin as if unable to acknowledge what had happened, her own blood dripping down her arm to the floor.

Zayl gently separated the cut edges of armor. Blood bubbled up; the blade had nicked Jacob’s heart and sliced deep into the pectoral muscle below his shoulder. A blade like the destroyer’s did a lot of damage to human flesh, and this wound was worse than the one he had healed for Tyrael. There was little hope. He would have to act quickly if he had any chance at all to save Jacob’s life.

But time was running out for them to get back to Sanctuary, and the stone was doing ever-increasing damage to anyone in its vicinity. Any moment now, Luminarei would swarm them.

One chance, perhaps. It was something he had only tried once before, and the necromancer knew that he would have to make a great sacrifice in the attempt.

He removed his materials from his pouch, his fingers trembling slightly as he took Humbart out and put the skull down next to him, then set the candle in place and lit the flame. He had no idea what a healing spell would do here in the Heavens or if it would even work at all.

“Easy, lad,” Humbart muttered. “Remember what it took from you to attach your hand—”

“I am aware of that,” Zayl said quietly. A binding to the darkness that lay between life and death, promises made to things that would be better left to lie still. There were wraiths that had pledged eternal service to the Burning Hells and could be summoned for work such as this, but those who promised to restore some part of the living would, more often than not, end up taking more than their share, their hunger unable to be denied. And he did not believe they could be raised at all in the Heavens.

But one was already here.

Blood continued to well up from the wound. Jacob’s body

shuddered. Zayl knew the flesh would not heal unless he reversed the spell of his own making.

“Hurry,” Shanar said. “He’s dying!”

“Use me,” Humbart said. “The spell that keeps me bound to this skull—”

“No,” Zayl said. “I will not sacrifice you for my sins.” He looked at his right hand, hidden under the black padded glove that he had worn for so long it seemed like a part of him. “Keep watch over the satchel,” he said to Gynvir. “You will have to carry it from here. Jacob cannot, and I will be too weak.” *Or dead*, he thought, but did not say it. He stripped his glove off, hearing the gasps of the two women as they saw the white bone and withered tendon and sinew, the blackened stump where the remains of the hand had fused onto his wrist.

Zayl raised his arm above Jacob’s wound, muttering the binding of blood spell under his breath. He touched his dagger’s tip to Jacob’s flesh. Then Zayl took the blade and inserted it into his forearm just above the blackened skin, yanking downward.

The dagger blazed to life as his own blood splattered Jacob’s chest and shoulder. Zayl gritted his teeth. The pain was all-consuming and immense, a fire raging over his body, but he held strong as he circled his wrist with the razor-sharp blade.

The blood spatter began to reverse. Drips ran back up from Jacob’s wound to the dagger, coating it in crimson. Heat radiated from his bones, flames licking Zayl’s wrist as the hand began to detach from the rest of him, hanging by threads of tendon. The fire singed the stump of his wrist and leaped downward to Jacob’s chest, licking across the open wound as the skeletal hand dropped, bone fingers plucking at the sliced edges, pulling them together.

The necromancer clutched the stump of his arm to his side and slipped his dagger back into its sheath. The pain was so deep and strong he nearly passed out. But he kept his eyes on Jacob’s wound, saw his own hand continue to stitch the flesh together, and for a moment, the flames flickering over it took the shape of a demon with a dragon’s tail and thickly scaled body as they burrowed deep inside.

Zayl’s skeletal hand finally went lifeless and tumbled to the floor next to him, and Jacob’s skin puckered and blackened as the flames consumed it from the inside out. Jacob’s eyes fluttered open, and he gave a guttural groan, reaching up to grab Zayl by the shoulders.

“Hurts . . .” he managed, and coughed. The necromancer held him tightly with his left hand, keeping his right wrist tucked against his body as the last of the flames died out. Then Zayl rolled over onto his back, his chest heaving, trying to find a balance within himself again as the world turned over and faded to a dull, featureless gray.



Jacob felt himself lifted into the air. “He’s not responding,” he heard Gynvir say. With great effort, he opened his eyes in time to see Shanar help Zayl gather the skull and the candle and something else that looked like bones. She got the necromancer to his feet and slipped his left arm around her waist, where he clung tightly, his head slumping toward his chest. It was as if Jacob were looking through a fog that was slowly lifting, and something was sitting on him, an animal that had burrowed inside his skin and was clinging on for the ride.

“There’s no time to revive him,” Shanar was saying. “We’ve got to move!”

They began to run, Shanar half-dragging the necromancer with her, Gynvir running, too, with Jacob slung over her shoulder. Amazingly, there was no pain, even with him being jostled up and down roughly like this; the wound had healed completely, and strength was already coming back to his limbs. He couldn’t remember what had happened. Everything was blank after the destroyer’s blade had gone into his flesh and he had fallen forward, feeling his life draining away.

Now he was alive again. It was some kind of miracle. “Put me down,” he said, but the barbarian either didn’t hear him or refused to respond. They barreled headlong through an archway carved with two gigantic wings, into the Gardens of Hope. “Put me *down*,” Jacob said again, and this time, Gynvir complied, setting him gently on his feet.

“Are you all right?” Gynvir had him by the shoulders. “You almost died.”

The angels who had been in the gardens had disappeared. There was no time to ponder why; Jacob could feel the tingling energy from the Black Soulstone slung around Gynvir’s waist. “I feel as good as new,” he said. “Better, actually. But you . . .”

Blood dripped steadily down the barbarian’s arm. “I will live,” she said. “Do not worry.” But the barbarian could not hide a wince of pain. “You killed the Sicarai,” she said. “How?”

“I did what?” Jacob shook his head. What she was saying made no sense. And yet pieces began to come back to him, as if from a dream: regaining his feet, a power coursing through his limbs as he picked up Cullen’s nephalem key . . .

Jacob looked at the necromancer, who had extricated himself from Shanar’s grip and stood alone, swaying slightly and hunched over his right arm, which he held against his body as if he had been wounded.

“What about him?”

“The dark wizard saved your life,” Gynvir said. “At much cost to

himself." The barbarian's gaze seemed to hold some kind of grudging respect.

Jacob took the necromancer's forearm and gently pulled it away from him to expose the blackened stump where his hand had been. Zayl looked up from beneath his slash of black hair, damp now with sweat. His strange eyes glowed from within dark pits, his pale face even more ghostly than before.

"What have you done?" Jacob said.

"Saved your skin, he did," Humbart said from the pouch. "Took his own hand to do it! But there's no time to waste chattering. Come on, move yourselves!"

At the far side of the gardens, they slipped through the line of light trees and onto the wide boulevard that led to the Pools of Wisdom. As they did, Jacob heard a thunderous noise approaching from the other direction, where the boulevard ended at a gigantic set of columns at the entrance to the heart of the Silver City. Through the opening came Mikulov, running toward them so fast he was little more than a blur, and behind him poured an army of Luminarei in flight, darkening the sky as they spread out above the monk with blazing wings and swords drawn.

"Holy . . ." Shanar breathed softly. Bolts of pure energy began to rain down upon the monk's head, thrown by the angels like lightning. He dodged and ducked and spun as the bolts exploded all around him, digging holes into the stone and raising clouds of gray dust.

Mikulov looked up and saw his companions, gesturing wildly. "Run!" he shouted, as more bolts rained down, narrowly missing him. "To the portal!"

The others turned and rushed headlong into the Pools of Wisdom, bracing themselves for the sudden rush of icy-cold air, the emptiness swallowing all sound. The portal was still open beyond the Fount, waiting for them.

But someone else was waiting, too.

"So it has come to this." The voice, soft and yet filled with strength, held a tint of sadness as it cut through the dead air around them. "I had not wanted to believe that he would betray our trust, regardless of his intentions, but I suppose I knew the truth all along."

Golden light washed through the Pools of Wisdom as a creature, hovering above the ground, seemed to float forward. Wings made of fire spread gloriously above a shape that was clearly female, a humming presence that knocked the breath from Jacob's lungs and made him drop to his knees.

"I am Auriel, archangel of Hope," she said. "And you are trespassing on sacred ground, Horadrim."

Chapter Forty-One



The Council Chamber

The corridor outside the Courts of Justice was empty.

Tyrael flashed back in his mind to a time not so long ago, when he had been unable to sleep and walked these empty halls to the Angiris Council chamber. He had looked upon the Black Soulstone where it sat on its perch like some dark bird of prey . . . had felt the slow corruptive influence consuming the places he had loved and the beings he had called his brothers and sisters.

He had sacrificed much to try to save them all, risking their wrath and his place among them, his own life and the lives of others, and still he wondered if what he had done was right. But perhaps he had known, even then, that his path would lead back to this.

Balzael had been there, watching. He wondered what might have happened that day had Auriel not interrupted them. Tyrael held Chalad'ar in one hand, El'druin in the other. Pain laced his body, the wound that had barely healed in his chest burning. But he was lifted up by the thought of revenge. He had a message to deliver, and he knew where Balzael would go. The place where every important decision of the past millennia had been made. The place where the corruption had begun to spread.

The Council chamber.



When Tyrael walked inside, Balzael was waiting for him.

The Luminarei lieutenant stood in the center of the room in front of the now-empty altar. His wings were spread out behind him, their glow illuminating the carved ceremonial wings of each archangel's seat, the glittering crystal floor, and the golden symbols that ran through it. Above him, the tall windows and arched crystal ceiling let in glorious beams of light. Already the stone's corruptive power was beginning to fade, and the Council chamber was returning to normal.

Except for the abomination that stood within it.

Tyrael's heart blazed white-hot with hate, his rage overflowing. He felt Chalad'ar urging him onward, his fate in this place and at the hands of one he had once commanded and might have called a friend. The thought only served to underscore how much he had changed and the gulf between his old life and his new one as a mortal. But there

were more questions he wanted answered first.

“How much did Imperius and the others know about your plans?” he said.

Balzael circled the altar. “That does not matter,” he said. “What matters is that everything you have worked for, everything your friends have struggled to achieve, is for nothing. You have played into our hands once again, coming after me and leaving them vulnerable.”

“If I kill you now,” Tyrael said, “they will be safe back in Sanctuary.”

“Kill me? I think not. I have been waiting for the chance to spill your blood. You cannot defeat an angel, not anymore.”

“I will see to it that you cannot reach them, Balzael—and if you do, you have underestimated their strength. Look at what Jacob has done to your best warrior, even while mortally wounded. These are *nephalem*, embracing their lineage and allowing the power that lies within them to burst forth like a fountain. It is over.”

Balzael chuckled again, the sound filling the chamber. “You are blind,” he said. “To so many things. The stone they carry is slowly eating them alive. Could you not feel it? Without you to guide them, do you really think they will be able to resist its influence? The darkness within the human soul is as deep and powerful as the light. And we have an army on the ground, ready to do our bidding. They have been operating quietly in small groups, snatching humans away in the night, testing their abilities, instilling doubt and fear in the populace, and readying themselves for the full assault. They have helped track you every step of the way. What you have seen in Sanctuary is a small sample of the full strength of our forces.”

The phantoms . . . “Who are you working with, Balzael?”

“You will never know the truth,” Balzael said. “But the answer might surprise you, if only you lived to see it.”

Without another word, the Luminarei lieutenant rushed forward across the space that separated them, his weapon out, wings trailing behind him in luminescent threads of crackling energy.

He moved so quickly Tyrael barely had the chance to raise El’druin to protect himself from the blow. Chalad’ar dropped to the floor and rolled away as the two swords met with a mighty clash that echoed like thunder.

Balzael’s strength was overpowering, and Tyrael had been badly weakened by the loss of blood. El’druin would hold its own against the bite of the lieutenant’s angelic blade, but it could not move Tyrael’s hand more quickly, could not parry and strike without him.

He moved away from Balzael’s furious assault, but the angel was far faster, and only Tyrael’s defensive skills saved his life within the first few seconds. Balzael hovered around him, sword flashing, as

Tyrael positioned the altar between them, managing to slow the relentless attack for a few moments. “You cannot hide behind that for long,” Balzael said, his tone mocking now. “The great Tyrael, former archangel, now . . . nothing? You have no place here, not anymore. Your choice to become a mortal has led to your end, and I will be happy to serve as your executioner.”

He flew over the stone pillar, and Tyrael ducked and spun away to the other side, keeping the dance going for as long as possible. His chest ached; his muscles trembled with fatigue. The Horadrim would be at the portal by now. He only needed to delay Balzael a few moments longer to be sure they were safe in the nephalem catacombs

Balzael’s next move was too fast and unexpected for Tyrael to counter. With a single, mighty slash, his sword shattered the stone altar between them. Balzael flew at Tyrael with a growl of fury, his sword meeting El’druin and smashing it backward, driving the hilt into Tyrael’s face.

The impact brought stars to Tyrael’s eyes and knocked him to the floor of the Council chamber, where he lay stunned and bleeding, his fingers numb, his vision blurry.

El’druin lay somewhere beyond his reach.

But he did not search for the sword. It was no use to him anymore. He reached for something else.

Balzael slashed lightly at Tyrael’s arm, drawing blood, and stood over him in triumph. “You are defenseless and beaten,” he said. “I would ask for your surrender, but there will be no mercy.”

As Balzael raised his sword for the killing blow, Tyrael reached again, and his fumbling fingers touched what he had been searching for. He grabbed Chalad’ar and brought it to his chest.

Balzael found himself looking directly down into the chalice’s swirling depths, and he stiffened, his weapon freezing in place as he let out a low cry. Tyrael moved the chalice closer as he struggled to his knees, keeping the opening facing Balzael, letting him fall into it as Tyrael had, letting him feel the mad rush of pure emotion, the overwhelming assault on his senses. And now Tyrael looked for his sword, calling to El’druin. *There*. It had come to rest too far away for him to reach but close enough to have in his hands in an instant if he let go of Chalad’ar.

Balzael was fighting against the chalice, his mind surely rebelling against it as he shuddered in place. When the hold was broken, Tyrael knew he would remain disoriented for a moment. He would have to act fast.

Tyrael set the chalice down and rolled, coming to his feet in one smooth motion, his lifelong training taking over as he picked up

El'druin and turned to strike. But Balzael recovered more quickly than he had anticipated and was already moving himself, shouting in anger at Tyrael's ploy, his sword whistling through the air and grazing Tyrael's shoulder, knocking him off balance. He spun, but it was no use, as Balzael's sword struck him broadside in the skull, and he went down, knowing that this time, it was truly over.

Sounds seemed to come from a great distance as he fought through a fog of strange colors and shapes. Tyrael closed his eyes, reeling.

A flash of brilliant light washed across his eyelids. Balzael screamed as if in triumph. But incredibly, there was no searing pain as his weapon struck Tyrael's flesh, no fading consciousness and icy-cold fingers pulling Tyrael down toward oblivion.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw the lieutenant impaled on a flaming spike that protruded from the center of his chest.

Solarion, the Spear of Valor.

His scream had not been one of triumph but of agony.

Balzael was lifted into the air, flailing helplessly against the pressure, unable to free himself. Behind him stood Imperius, holding his spear and the angel impaled on it.

Tyrael got to his feet, then swayed as the floor underneath him seemed to buckle. His mind was buzzing like an angry hornet, the pain making his entire body want to shut down. Instead, he straightened, standing tall. If the end was to come now, he would be ready for it.

Balzael screamed again, the sound rising in pitch until it threatened to burst Tyrael's eardrums. The crystal dome cracked ominously, sending dust and debris down on them like snowflakes drifting through the beams of light. Balzael's wound grew bright, then brighter, the light flaring hot as the sun before fading away to nothing.

Finally, it was over.



Imperius flung the remains of his lieutenant aside and pointed Solarion at Tyrael. "I will not allow your death to come like this," he said. "But you shall answer for your crimes against the Heavens, *brother*."

"You call me brother still, after sending a destroyer to hunt me down like a demon?"

Imperius seemed to pause for a moment, and something like sadness crept into his voice. "How could you say this? I would not

have condoned such an act.”

“We have argued for thousands of years—”

“And we have also saved each other’s lives on the battlefield countless times. I asked Balzael to return you unharmed to face your charges in the Ring. But you have gone against the Heavens and against the ruling of the Council. You have led a band of thieves into our very midst. You shall surely be imprisoned for this and stripped of your archangel status.”

“I was no longer one of you the moment I shed my wings, Imperius. I see that now.”

“Perhaps. But the mortals you gathered have come here and killed members of our own kind! I had always hoped you would see the errors of your ways, see what humanity was capable of, understand why we must stamp out this human plague once and for all to ensure our victory over the Burning Hells. And yet now you stand before me, even after I have slaughtered a member of the Luminarei to save your life, and you accuse me of sending an assassin to kill you, one I had considered my brother until the End of Days.”

“I do not believe what you say. And we had no other choice. The stone—”

“Do not blame the stone for your sins! It was safe here, guarded by us! One thousand times safer than among the world of men. And now you have put us all in danger—”

“No, Imperius.”

Two other forms swept into the room and hovered next to Imperius, their wings spread wide behind them as they floated above the floor.

Auriel and Itherael.

It was Auriel who had spoken. She came forward between Tyrael and Imperius. “Tyrael may not have chosen the best way to accomplish his goals, but he was right. The Black Soulstone was slowly tainting our world. If it had continued, we would all have been lost to the darkness forever.”

Imperius swelled with anger. “That is madness, Auriel. The stone is nothing while the Prime Evil is imprisoned—”

“I do not know its method of action,” Auriel said. “I only know what I have felt, what I have seen. And the corruption in the gardens, within this very chamber, was real. It changed us in ways we are only beginning to understand. Ways that were subtle enough at first not to be noticed by those who were blinded by their own pride. Can you not feel it? Already the taint is fading.” She turned to Tyrael. “Perhaps it took a mortal to open my mind to the truth.”

“But the humans must be held accountable,” Imperius said. “Lives have been lost. The Luminarei will bring the stone back here, where it belongs.”

"They will not," Auriel said, "because I ordered them to let the humans go."

"You did *what*?" Imperius rose to his full height, and for a moment, it seemed as if he might strike against Auriel herself. "You had no *right*!"

"The humans are gone, Imperius, to a place we cannot reach. The stone is somewhere safe, and it is better that we do not know where. The Heavens can be peaceful again. Do not let your pride and your rage overshadow the fact that we are whole once more. Let us show mercy."

"Mercy is a sign of weakness," Imperius said. "It has no place in war."

"You would say the same of love," Auriel said. "And compassion. But we should value these things during war and peace. They are not weaknesses but signs of strength." She moved to the center of the Council chamber. "I call for an emergency vote of the Council. Put Tyrael on trial, and let him be judged for his crimes in the Ring; or allow him to remain a member of the Council as Aspect of Wisdom, acting as ambassador between angels and men."

"You—you cannot do this."

"It is already done." Auriel raised her sword. "I vote for his reinstatement and return to Sanctuary. It is where he wants to be and where he belongs. He can guard the stone, as he has wanted to do from the beginning." She turned to Tyrael. "I wish you had continued to try to work through the Council, but perhaps we gave you no choice. I am sorry I did not listen, my brother. And I am sorry you have chosen this path away from the only home you have ever known. But in my mind, it is yours to choose." She turned back to Imperius. "Your vote."

"I—" Imperius struggled with himself, his wings snapping behind him. "He stands trial!"

"And Itherael?"

The final member of the Angiris Council hovered in silence for a long moment. It seemed as if he might not speak at all. "He is no longer an archangel," Itherael said finally. "But he remains a member of the Council. Tyrael acted with the best intentions to save both worlds. For that, he shall not be judged here, but I shall hope he will find the answers he seeks elsewhere. His fate is known to me no more."

"You are both fools!" Imperius thundered, his voice bringing a rain of dust and shards of crystal. Solarion glowed white-hot as he summoned the spear once again, and Tyrael believed he had every intention of using it. "You have chosen to destroy us! By breeding with demons, Inarius corrupted the holy essence of the angels and

brought shame and darkness upon us all—a human plague. The Black Soulstone will open the door on Sanctuary to the return of the Prime Evil, and the gates of Hell will pour forth with abominations!”

“It is better to take the chance of hiding it,” Tyrael said. “If it remains here, the Heavens will surely become hopelessly corrupted and fall to darkness.”

“The deaths of our brethren will be *your* responsibility.” Imperius landed in front of Tyrael, pointing Solarion at him like an accusing finger. “You have peered into Chalad’ar at long last. Has the chalice not shown you this? Have you learned *nothing*?”

Tyrael smiled bitterly as his brother-in-arms waited for his reply. So Imperius had not been responsible for Balzael’s actions after all—at least, not all of them. But his views on Sanctuary could never be swayed. Imperius saw things as right and wrong, good and evil. There were no subtleties, no shades of gray.

For a brief moment, he thought about what might have been had he chosen not to shed his wings and become mortal. What would have become of him then? Would he have eventually been convinced of the validity of Imperius’s beliefs? *He is still my brother*. But Tyrael’s trust in him had been damaged beyond repair, and Imperius would never view him in the same way again.

Perhaps, after all this time, he was closer to man than angel.

“I have used the chalice,” Tyrael said. “They say that all emotions of sentient beings are contained there, and that may be true. I found what it means to be human, even if I could not become one myself. But to witness these emotions all at once is to distance oneself from them, to ultimately become immune to them. What I found was the end of mercy, the end of love and kindness, and the end of emotion, rather than its beginning.

“But Chalad’ar has failed in this. I have chosen to remain in the human world, to embrace their potential for goodness and light. You may believe their potential for evil is too great a risk to take. But I believe we must take that risk. For without them, all hope is lost, and the darkness will eventually win.”

“If you turn your back on me, we are forever enemies,” Imperius said. His voice had become quiet, but the coldness emanating from him was strong. “There will be no returning from this, Tyrael.”

Tyrael found Chalad’ar still sitting near him on the floor. He picked it up, feeling the familiar heft of it, the energy. But the thirst to look into Chalad’ar’s depths was gone.

Such a small thing to contain such power, he thought. *But it does not wield that power over me. Not anymore.*

Tyrael threw the chalice in the direction of Imperius. It hit the floor and rolled, coming to rest directly before him. “I am mortal and

always will be, and humanity is the future of you all, whether you choose to recognize that or not,” Tyrael said.

And then he turned and left the Council chamber, walking toward a new and unknown future.

Chapter Forty-Two



The Return of the Nephalem

Tyrael was gone.

Jacob's first thought, when they all had stepped safely through the portal and reached the nephalem city at long last, was that they had left an essential part of themselves behind. It was like losing a limb.

There was no way Tyrael could have survived for this long. Their leader had fallen.

Gynvir set the satchel down and stepped as far away as possible, leaning her shoulder on the wall with her bloody hands on her knees. She looked as if she might topple over at any moment. Her skin was gray, her breathing labored. The Black Soulstone radiated a hot, oozing sickness that they could all feel deep in their bones. But the same protective spell that concealed the nephalem city from angels and demons would keep it contained within the catacombs. They would bury the Black Soulstone here, deep below the surface, in these farthest reaches of the warren of chambers where Rakkis himself had been laid to rest. There it would remain for all eternity.

Finishing the mission was the only way to pay tribute to those who had sacrificed their own lives to save this world, and Jacob would make certain it was done, if he had to carry it that far himself.

"You're really going to be fine?"

Shanar was next to him, her hands around his shoulders, her beautiful face inches from his own. She touched the closed wound on his chest, and for the first time, he realized that it ended at exactly the same spot where the phantom had marred him, obliterating the strange crescent-shaped scar and replacing it with another. He felt something else within him, almost as if he carried some other being inside his body. It was an odd sensation but not entirely unpleasant. Whatever Zayl had done to him, he was alive, and that was more than he might have hoped for when the sword had first found its mark.

Jacob considered Shanar's question. *Was he fine?* He nodded, aware of the difference within him, the newfound confidence that the battle with the Sicarai had wrought. His strength had never come from El'druin or any other weapon; it had come from inside him.

Perhaps she felt the change, too. For once, she dropped the lighthearted banter and simply kissed him softly. "Thank the heavens," she whispered. "But you owe me one, pal. I almost died of fright watching you bleed out all over the floor."

Jacob smiled, but his heart remained heavy. "You should check on Gynvir. She's been wounded, and who knows what the stone has done

to her. We'll need to leave here soon, or we'll all be in danger."

She studied him a moment longer, then nodded. "A take-charge kind of man. I could get used to that." She turned to go, then turned back. "He might still make it," she said. "Don't give up on him yet."

Jacob shook his head. There would be a time for him to mourn, but now was not it. Tyrael had wanted him to become a leader of the Horadrim, and he was going to do it. There were others he must attend to, important things to accomplish, and the phantoms were still out there somewhere in the dark. Sanctuary was far from safe.

Cullen sat on a stone wall, the monk at his side. Cullen had not spoken since their return, and now he stared into space. He had lost his glasses, and he looked softer, more vulnerable, and yet there was a new energy about him, one that might make others keep their distance.

Jacob turned to the necromancer. Zayl was a shell of his former self. He stood, still clutching his blackened stump, while Humbart muttered something too low for Jacob to hear.

"You saved my life," Jacob said. "I don't know what I can ever do to repay you for your sacrifice."

Zayl nodded once, his eyes regaining a bit of their former strange glint. "You would have done the same, if you were in my place—"

Jacob felt someone at his shoulder a split second before he was pushed aside. "You," Gynvir said, pointing at Zayl. She was breathing hard. Her arm was still bleeding, although the drips had finally slowed enough to make Jacob think she would live.

Jacob thought she might attack the necromancer, but instead, she stuck out her hand. "I might not like the magic you wield, but I will admit when I was wrong," she said. "You are welcome to fight beside me anytime, necromancer."

Zayl held up the blackened stump of his right arm with a slight smile. "I don't think I'll be shaking anyone's hand anytime soon. But thank you."

"Right," Gynvir muttered. "Sorry."

The sound of rapidly approaching footsteps made them all turn. Lorath Nahr came into the room, followed by several knights and the Horadrim from Gea Kul they had left behind. Lorath was overjoyed to see them, but his face fell when Jacob explained what had happened, and the mood of the party quickly turned from one of celebration to one of somber respect for the fallen.

Everything changed in an instant when Tyrael stepped through the portal.



The former archangel surveyed his remaining team members as they swarmed around him, overjoyed at his return. A group of strangers just a few weeks before, they were now a small army of warriors who trusted one another with their lives. They had faced nearly insurmountable challenges and survived, and the Black Soulstone was safely within the catacombs.

But their victory had not been without a terrible sacrifice.

As the celebration settled down, Tyrael put a hand on Cullen's shoulder. "We have lost a good man," he said. "Thomas will not be forgotten."

"Never," Cullen said. A single tear traced its way down his face. "He was like a brother to me."

"Your actions in the Ring of Judgment saved our lives," Tyrael said. He looked out at the others gathered before him. "Without all of your efforts, the Sicarai would have slaughtered us, and the stone would have remained in the Heavens. All of Sanctuary has you to thank for its survival. A short time ago, I asked you to carry a great burden, to assume a responsibility that was not of your own making. In doing this, I had hoped that you would embrace your calling and fulfill your destinies, although the odds were long. I can say now that you have gone beyond the call of duty, and everything we have fought for has been realized. The stone has been returned to Sanctuary, where it will remain under our guard. All of you are heroes."

A small cheer went up from the crowd. Tyrael held up his hand. "We are not done yet," he said. "Although Balzael has been defeated and the archangels have pledged to leave us in peace, threats to Sanctuary remain. The phantoms still haunt the people, and rogue demons must be stamped out. Those who fought at my side in the Heavens must rest and take time away from the stone to lessen its effect before they begin to fight these battles. The others shall remain here. We must place the stone in the tomb of Rakkis and seal it away, and the tomb must never be reopened. Those who remain will become the guardians of this place, and the secret of the stone will lie with them and them alone."

Tyrael thought of the text he had been working on, nearly finished: the completion of Leah and Deckard Cain's work and a summary of what he had learned as a mortal—a record of what had led him to this moment. He would give it to the Horadrim for safekeeping. He still had much to learn about his new life, and his future was unclear, but he knew that he would live it in Sanctuary, serving the light in

whatever way he could.

This was his home now.

Epilogue



The Guardian

The thing that had once been Norlun crouched among the deep shadows of the stinking cell. The guards who ran the secret prison underneath the Church of the Holy Order had left some time ago and removed all the torches except for one that burned near the base of the steps that led above. That did not matter; even through these unfamiliar human eyes, he did not need much light to see.

By the time the guards returned in the morning, their world would be entirely different.

The templar sect he had been manipulating for his own purposes in Westmarch was in shambles, the men either dead or imprisoned with him. It was no great loss to the Guardian. Norlun was a weak man at the core and his templar were a means to an end, a distraction and cover for a much more important effort on a much grander scale.

The Guardian had watched through Norlun's eyes for some time, waiting for their plans to come to fruition. It had been an easy thing for him to take over the man's body and soul, and waiting was something he was familiar with over the many millennia of his existence.

But now things had changed. It was time for a new approach.

The Guardian looked at the pile of bodies in the corner of the cell. There had been six men in here with him when the knights locked them away, and space had been quite tight. He studied their haunted features, drained of color, expressions of terror permanently frozen on their faces.

Death is the void, and mortals fear it.

Fear was something he could use.

Balzael had failed, and the Angiris Council had refused to act. That was also no great loss, however. The Guardian was not concerned with whether Balzael survived long enough to join him in the purging of Sanctuary—he had all the assistance he needed already on the ground.

His Death Angels.

Even the loss of the new angel, one he would have enjoyed recruiting to his side, was not a major blow to his plans. And now, thanks to those fools who called themselves Horadrim, the last piece of the puzzle was within his reach.

The Guardian stood up and spread his arms wide. Norlun's physical body began to change, his arms and legs lengthening, spine cracking as it stretched and bent, tendons and ligaments popping as they

adjusted to the strain. His flesh melted, running from his bones like soft butter. If anyone in the cell had been left to see it, they might have dug rivers into their own flesh trying to escape the horror.

“Hey,” someone called from another cell. “What’s happening in there? Sounds like bones breaking! You safe, Lord Norlun?”

The Guardian did not answer. He reached out with unnaturally long arms, blowing the cell door off its hinges. The heavy iron clanged off the wall and came to rest in a cloud of choking dust. The man in the other cell shouted, calling out for help, as the Guardian stepped forth into the flickering light, his form absorbing the torch’s energy, drawing it out, and extinguishing the flame.

The world was plunged into darkness.

The Guardian would begin with the human souls who were imprisoned down here before moving into the catacombs, and then he would rain terror and destruction down upon the heads of the people of Sanctuary.

The time had finally come for him to reveal his true self.

The Black Soulstone was waiting.

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